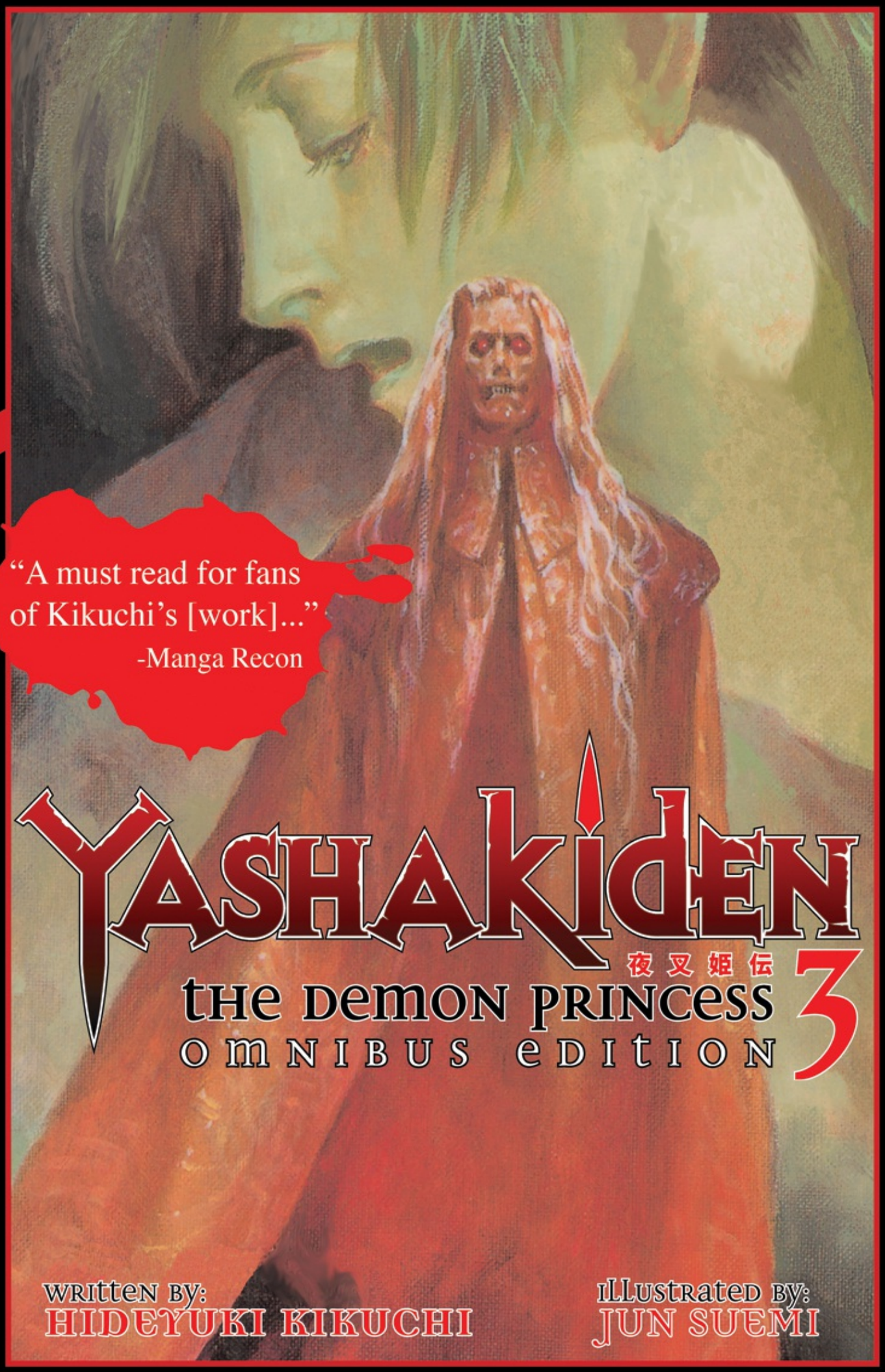
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YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 3
OMNIBUS EDITION

WRITTEN BY:
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

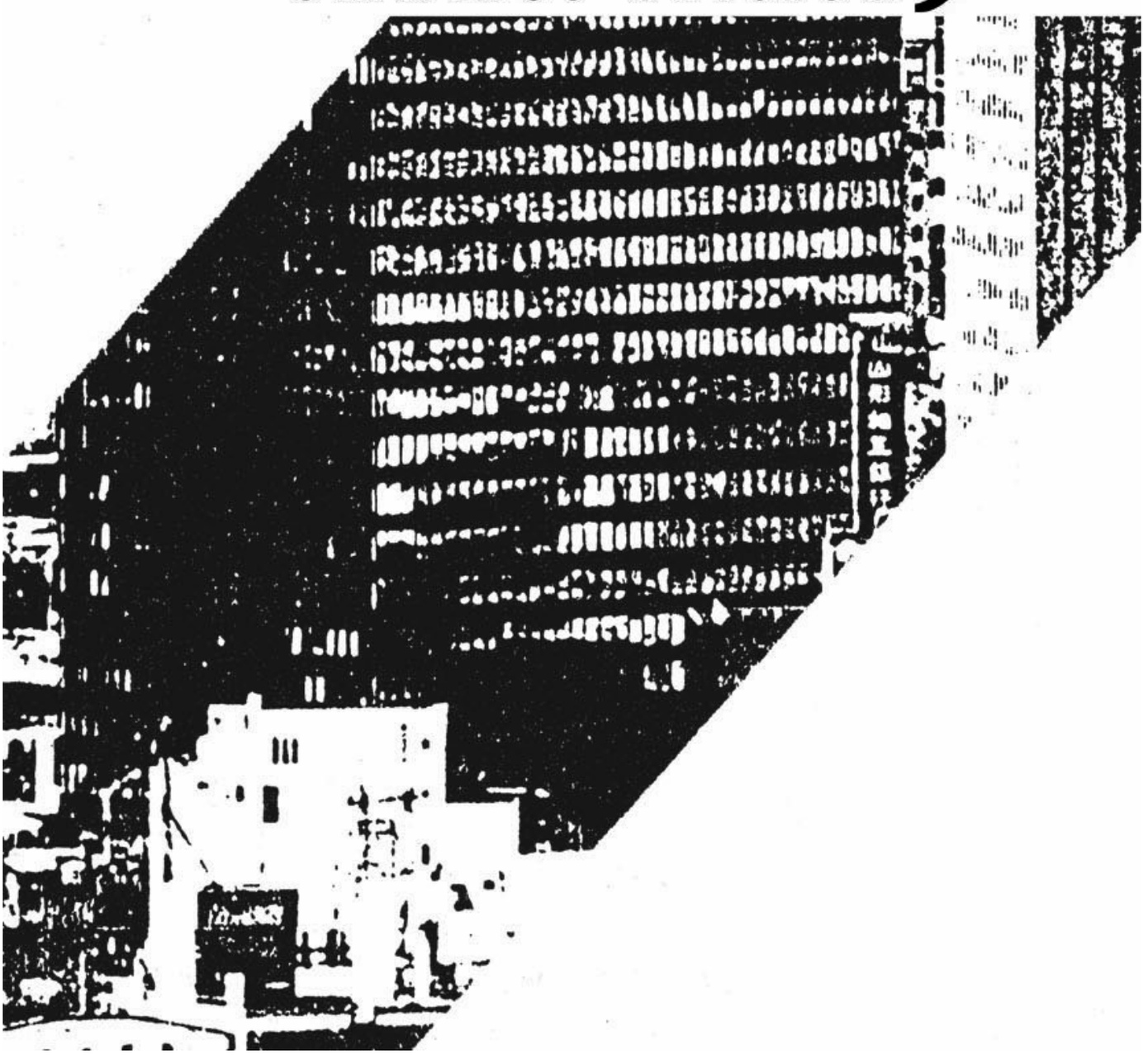
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YASHAKIDEN

夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 3

OMNIBUS EDITION



Author's Bio

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in 1949 in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture. He graduated from Aoyama University. His auspicious debut came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*.

In 1985, the classic *Makaikou* was published in three volumes, elevating him to the ranks of bestselling authors.

Since then, as his loyal readers can testify, he has proven himself a jack of all literary trades. This is Omnibus Volume 3 (comprised of the original Volumes 3 and 4) of his beloved *Yashakiden* epic, set in the critically acclaimed "Demon City Blues" universe.

Kikuchi's more recent work includes the *Blue Mask* series.



Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
Eugene Woodbury

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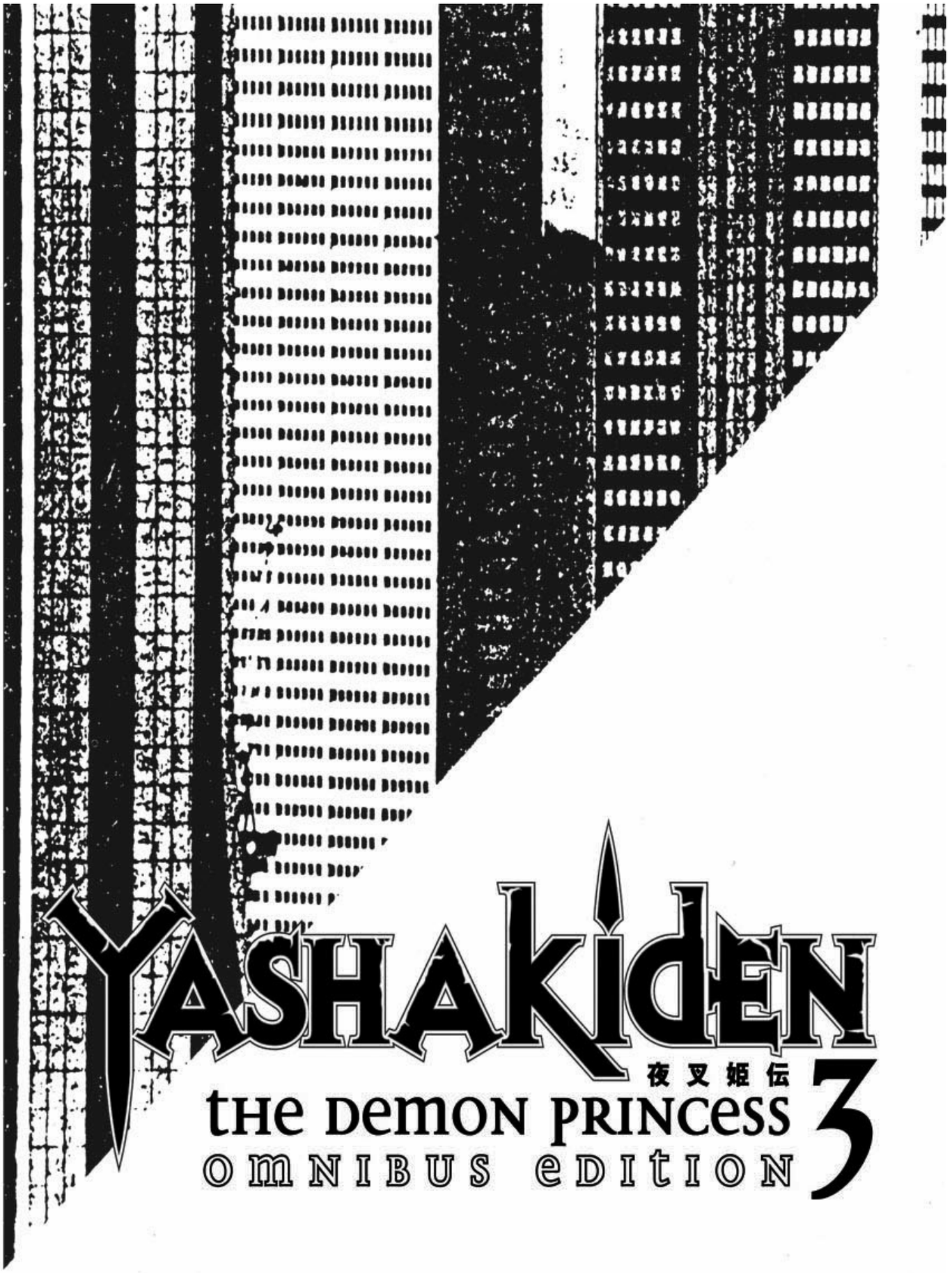
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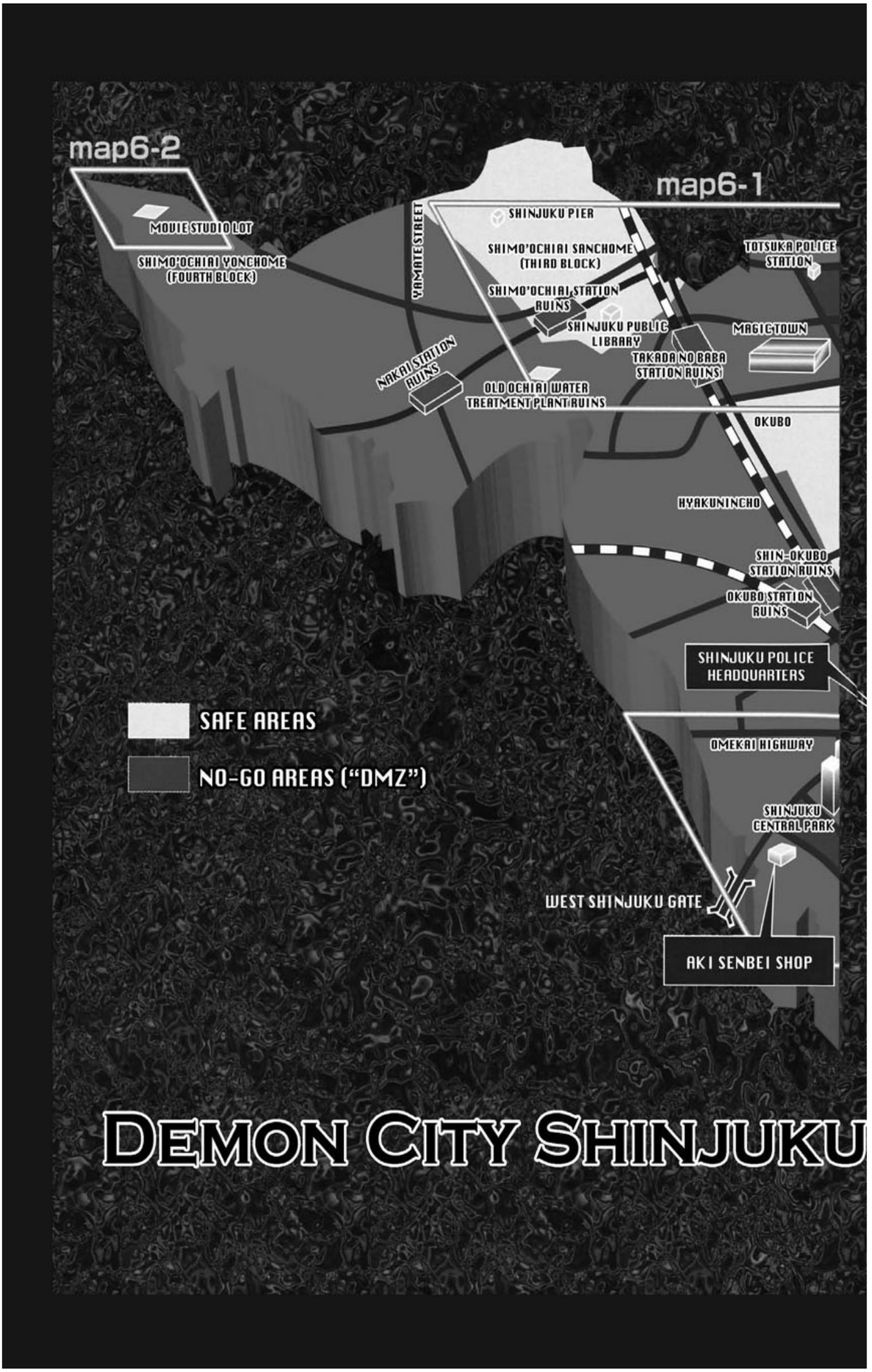
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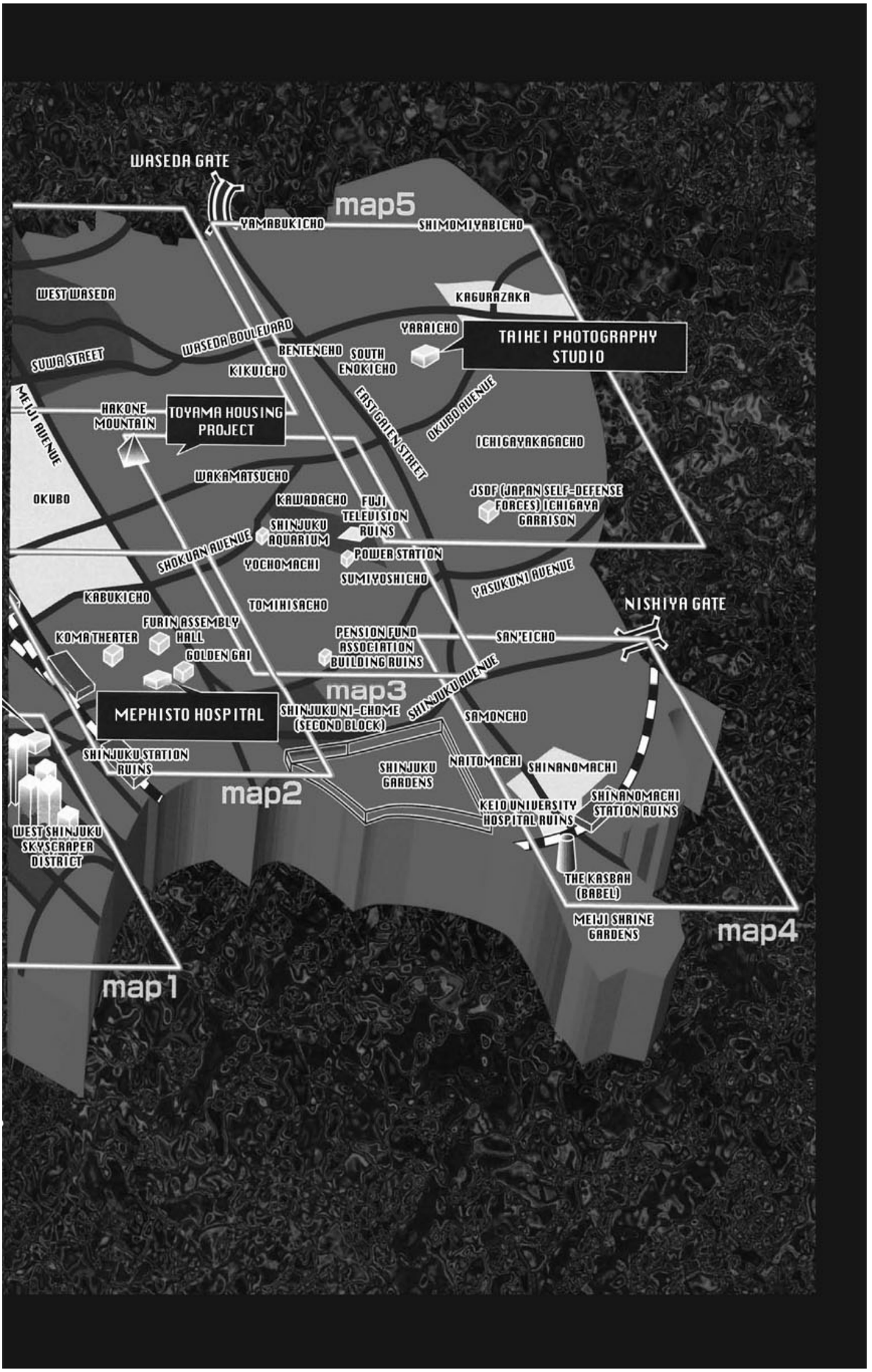
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YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS
OMNIBUS EDITION
3


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SHINJUKU POLICE HEADQUARTERS
SAFE AREAS
NO-GO AREAS ("DMZ")
OMEKAI HIGHWAY
SHINJUKU CENTRAL PARK
WEST SHINJUKU GATE
AKI SENBEI SHOP
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SUWA STREET
BENTENCHO
SOUTH ENOKICHO
KIKUICHO
MEIJI AVENUE
HAKONE MOUNTAIN
TOYAMA HOUSING PROJECT
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JSDF (JAPAN SELF-DEFENSE FORCES) ICHIGAYA GARRISON
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SHOKUAN AVENUE
POWER STATION
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Main Characters

Setsura Aki

The manager and owner of a *senbei* shop and P.I. agency. A handsome man with magical powers literally at his fingertips, he defeats his enemies by wielding strands of sub-micron thin “devil wire.”

Mephisto

It is rumored that the “Demon City Physician,” as beautiful as he is feared, can even bring the dead back to life.

Princess

The Chinese vampire Biki—as gorgeous as she is evil—has wandered the world for four thousand years in search of a safe refuge for herself and her followers.

Kikiou

This crafty old warlock is Princess’s principal retainer. He desires to subjugate all of Demon City Shinjuku.

Ryuuki

A later addition to Princess's retinue but also a vampire, he plays the mesmerizing ghost koto *Silent Night* and wields a powerful, death-dealing *qi* at his command.

Shuuran

A vampire and servant of Princess, she can fashion killer vampire dolls from her own blood.

General Bey

The blond, blue-eyed vampire who can defeat his enemies by using their own weapons against them.

Takako Kanan

A college student specializing in ancient Chinese history, she is swept into supernatural conflict because of her obsession with the mysterious Daji from the Hsia Dynasty.

Yakou

A vampire who lives in Demon City's Toyama housing project, he is the grandson of the Elder, who was defeated and killed by Princess.

Galeen Nuvenberg The Czech Republic's greatest wizardess and current resident of Demon City's "Magic Town." Her servants include a blue-eyed doll and a big obnoxious raven.

Lieutenant Matthews Commander of an elite squad from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces, sent into Demon City to eradicate the vampires.

The Story So Far

Having surmounted four thousand years of space and time, the beautiful Chinese vampire known as “Princess” has appeared in Demon City Shinjuku. She is accompanied by her supernatural retainers Kikiou, Ryuuki, and Shuuran.

Setsura Aki launches a heroic battle to the death to keep them from seizing control of Demon City. Galeen Nuvenberg and the Elder are defeated and Setsura is badly hurt. Demon City Shinjuku is becoming Vampire City before their very eyes.

Meanwhile, Setsura’s erstwhile ally, the inscrutable Mephisto, is behaving in an even more mysterious manner than usual.

Part One: The Demon General

Chapter One

A thick fragrance bedeviled her waking sleep. Not so much a fragrance as the smell of something edible. Takako Kanan was afraid to eat it. At the core of her dread was something lovely and sweet. And that was what she feared the most.

It was all vague and disconnected, like in a dream. But what had happened to her was seared into her memories, fresh and alive. In that sterile white hospital room, her blood had been consumed.

The terror leading up to that moment was etched into her mind, vivid enough to freeze the marrow in her bones—that ghastly woman walking up to her, her eyes ripped out by her own hand, half of her face burned to a crisp—and the other, the very embodiment of bewitching beauty.

Though she was quickly given a blood transfusion and confined to her bed, she already understood that she was no longer herself. The hunger roiling forth from the heart of darkness within her made her try to make a meal of her mother. And made her despise the white-clad doctor who'd stopped her.

She'd calmed down a bit since. But the incessant hunger left a hole in the pit of her stomach. All the while, other desires penetrated her like venom, fighting for control of her soul.

On the verge of yielding to the addiction and giving herself over to such hellish pleasures, the voice of her self-control stopped her in her tracks. That voice brought with it a weapon—a young man's face, paler and prettier than the moon. The owner of that face—that enveloped everything it perceived with a vast and serene aura—saved her.

Every time she saw that face, she hated what she'd become and sought the light that turned the eternal night into day. She called out his name and prayed for salvation.

But he never came. Instead, she sensed the presence of other visitors.

“What’s wrong?” asked one of the men-in-black. They’d been guarding her since they left the hospital.

She answered that they should expect visitors.

“Who? And from where?”

“I don’t know. They are far away.”

“When will they arrive?”

“I don’t know.”

“How many?”

“Two. *Her*—and somebody else.”

“That bitch, you mean?”

“Why do you address her so? It’s *her*. That lovely, lovely woman. And so frightening, *frightening*—”

“Calm down,” she was told. “We’re here. Ten men handpicked by Yakou-sama. They can hold their own against any she-demon.”

Takako was left by herself. At some point she could hear *her*—the sound of Princess breathing—the wintry breath flowing out of her unbeating heart.

She was coming.

She was opening the front door.

Takako’s body shook with horror, like a bucket of ice water poured down her back.

Two men flew at Princess, stakes in their hands. Then moving so fast they left white streaks in the air—her claws. A thick, black fog whirled around them. Up the stairs they came. A man was with her. Takako hated that she’d brought a *man* with her.

They moved into the hallway. A section of the ceiling swung down like a pendulum. It was studded with spear blades. It collided with her. She grabbed two of the blades with both hands. Not even a paper cut. That’s how magnificent

she was.

Three men dropped from the ceiling. Two came from both ends of the hallway. Seven altogether. They were fast. There was no way she could defend herself against all of them.

The inky blackness again exploded around them. A chilling color. And yet beautiful. And that *smell*—it clung to the senses.

What happened? The woman stood there as if nothing had happened. The men lay at her feet. The blackness oozed from their chests and crawled down the hallway. Was it her strength alone?

No, that man was chuckling to himself. He held a white clay pipe between his lips. Such a pretentious pose. What garish clothing. Like something worn by an aristocrat in a European costume drama. It didn't go with *her* at all. He had dispatched seven men without skipping a beat. Like an invisible whirl of wind. What looked like a scabbard hung from his waist.

One more man stood inside the door. How pitiful. Was he going to try and save her? She appreciated the thought, but was more impatient for *her* to appear.

Leave me. Run away.

They came.

The door opened.

Setsura Aki looked up at the towering building above him silhouetted against the starry sky. He felt something akin to respect. At forty-seven stories high and over five-hundred feet tall, the Shinjuku Keio Plaza Hotel had once been heralded as the first true skyscraper hotel in Japan.

The hotel had retained a certain degree of dignity. The area housing the new heart of the city kept its distance, just as ordinary people kept their distance from the haunted center of Shinjuku—Chuo Park—directly behind the hotel.

Setsura stepped through a hole in the chain-link fence cordoning off the hotel grounds like he'd just come here to visit. He didn't broadcast the vibe of somebody breaking and entering.

Moonlight illuminated the scene. But the fissure slanting down the side of the

building was as clear as in the middle of the day.

Casually holding his left hand against his neck, he walked into the back lobby. A darkness thick enough to cut with a knife filled the hallway. Setsura all but dissolved into the gloom.

A slash of moonlight stole in from somewhere, floating on the darkness like oil on water, and shimmering like brilliant ice where it settled on Setsura's countenance.

If any of his acquaintances could see him now, their eyes would pop. Unlike the doctor who ruled over the grounds of the former ward government buildings, the laid-back air of the young *senbei* shop owner usually set at ease the people around him. Now the good doctor would find him terrifying. This was a haunting beauty that truly haunted the soul.

Because of those two fang marks in his neck.

A person whose blood was consumed by a vampire would, to varying degrees, take on the aspects of his master. In Setsura's case—his superior force of will and physical strength and that he'd been bitten by one of Shuuran's dolls—might seem to put him beyond her direct control.

But the assault on his free will continued unabated. The controlling relationship between the biter and the bitten, the master and the servant, was not weakened by variables like distance and space.

In *The Balm of Deutschland*, published in 1504 by Schenk von Limpurg, the Bishop of Bamberg, the story was told of a woman from a prominent family who'd been turned into the slave of an aristocratic vampire clan. Separated by the treacherous Eifel Hills and a distance of 250 miles, she traveled there by foot day and night. It was apparent that even when the transformation was not complete, the master still exerted his control in the full light of day.

Bishop von Limpurg was best known for his interviews of seven victims in the process of turning into vampires. Along with recording those confessions, he also made the following observations about the "predilections" of a vampire:

- A fondness for blood.

- A freezing sensation in the heart and entrails.
- A fear of, and physical aversion to, sunlight.
- A constant hunger.
- The intermittent explosion of destructive impulses.
- An almost lustful longing for darkness.
- An intense, masochistic desire to be controlled.

Those symptoms were also eating away at Setsura, along with Ryuuki's *qi* festering in his gut like a bucket of mud. Under those conditions, a decorated SWAT officer from hell itself would have a hard time putting one step in front of the other.

Stepping into the main lobby, Setsura stopped to get a feel for the room. It was eleven o'clock at night, a time when the creatures of the night hungered for blood and went on the prowl.

The next morning, their victims would be discovered in their beds, in the parks, on the sides of roads, with inflamed puncture wounds on their necks and skin the color and texture of wax. They would respond to no stimuli except to exhibit a fear of sunlight. The citizens of Demon City would put two and two together quickly enough, and the excitable ones would be sharpening stakes and grabbing garlands of garlic.

Setsura thrust his right hand into the pocket of his slicker. The devil wire came alive at his fingertips. The molecule-thin titanium wires enhanced not only his sense of sight and touch, but also his hearing and smell. He was about to send his invisible tendrils around the lobby to investigate further—

Sensing something above him, he paused.

Without so much as a raised eyebrow, he headed to the elevators. He pushed the button. The doors opened with a dull hum. The electricity shouldn't have been flowing here. Like the blue blood through the vampire's veins, a different kind of energy flowed through the generators and wires.

Inside the elevator, Setsura pushed the button for the third basement level. His finger didn't hesitate. He just *knew* where his fellow creatures were. That demon

vibe enveloped him from all directions like a shower of cold rain.

“No more than ten,” he said to himself. And more in the upper floors above him, though he couldn’t tell how many.

A dim light flickered at the end of the narrow corridor. Setsura opened the door. The machinery room. In the pitch blackness, he sensed several beings carrying on in boisterous tones. They hadn’t sensed him coming.

“Who’s that?”

Setsura looked at the speaker. The ward registrar. He didn’t recognize the rest. Suit-wearing salaryman types were there. And gamblers and assorted wise guys.

“You got some good looks on you,” said a *hausfrau* in a blouse and jeans. Her eyes glowed blood-red. Her smoldering voice hissed past the fangs protruding from her raw, ruby lips.

Setsura gazed quietly back at her.

The machinery room had been stripped of its big equipment long ago. A line of steel lockers on the floor. The same kind of lockers Setsura had seen bobbing in the abandoned underground water treatment facility. Their purpose went without saying.

There were twenty lockers or so. With twelve of them here, half of them must be out on the town.

Setsura proceeded to the center of the room. A seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl was lying naked on the lockers. Her skin was covered with bite marks. He observed the slight rise and fall of her small breasts and the sound of her thin breaths.

“She’s brunch,” said a middle-aged salaryman wearing a short-sleeved shirt and plain necktie.

“Going out all at once would be a dead giveaway. So half of us wait here. But we get hungry, you know.” This one spoke as if pleading her cause, a true “lady of the night” in a gaudy dress. She stared at Setsura, a perverse and tenacious lust further staining her flaming eyes.

They gathered into a ring around Setsura.

“Why not kill her and be done with it? From the looks of it, you brought her here yesterday or today. With ten sucking her blood, she’d become one of you in less than a day.” Even in a place like this, Setsura spoke as dispassionately as always.

“She’s full to the brim,” said a gangbanger sporting a Mohawk. He wiped the drool from his mouth. The desire in his eyes as he looked at Setsura exceeded even that of the woman’s.

A girl in a tank top the same age as the victim girl said, “And dragging it out in dribs and drabs is so much fun. I love the way she whimpers and cries.”

Setsura listened impassively.

“But enough of her already. We’ve got a beaut here. I’m going to take my time enjoying you.”

“Suck you just a little bit every day. From that throat of yours, from your arms, your thighs.”

“I’ll go down on you for free,” said the whore. “No matter to me what else besides blood comes spurting out.”

The circle tightened like a noose. Men and women, old and young closed in on him, their blood-smeared fingers bent like talons, licking their lips in anticipation of the coming feast. They radiated an evil vibe that would shake the spirits of the bravest man and make him wish for a quick and easy death.

But they didn’t know. Their victim this time was Setsura Aki. Through the pitch black came a sound like a thinly-drawn breath.

Chapter Two

Zhang kicked off the ground and vaulted into the air. But it was Yuen who engaged the battle first. Before Zhang's weapon of choice—the willow leaf-like blade of his short sword—could strike, Yuen's *shuriken* pierced Kikiou's body like a flash of black lightning.

A hole opened up in the old man's chest. The fabric covering his back puffed out.

Yuen cried out in frustration. His aim was dead on, but the *shuriken* passed through Kikiou's body too easily. Because the robes covered mostly empty air.

Before Yuen could unleash a second volley, he saw Kikiou's staff headed at him. And then an explosion in front of his eyes as his own head flew apart.

Zhang swooped down like a diving bird, the foot-long blade penetrating the base of Kikiou's skull, burying itself to the hilt. Metal struck metal. The odd feeling of resistance traveled up the length of the sword. Zhang tried to leap away.

Kikiou's staff jabbed toward his abdomen—the staff that had crushed Yuen's skull. And that staff was fast.

Yakou's left hand traced a graceful arc and stopped it in its tracks. Appearing almost weightless, Kikiou's body followed the arc of Yakou's arm, spinning through the air, where it was pierced by a silver ray of light. He fell to the floor, making no effort to cushion the blow.

Zhang's short sword pierced his throat through to the back of his neck. The warlock writhed and moaned there in his death throes. The two gave him a wide berth.

"Get out of here," Yakou ordered. "I'll finish him off."

A sound like a horsefly's buzzing echoed in his ears. Realizing it was rising out of Kikiou's body, Yakou pushed out both hands down at the old man, his fingers spreading out at right angles to the wrist. From his palms burst a ball of energy, meeting the blast erupting from Kikiou's midsection. The radiating shockwave engulfed Zhang and bowed him backwards.

"Of course," Yakou murmured to himself, not sparing Zhang a second glance. Kikiou's staff pointed directly at him. "You're a master of *qi* as well. A demon *qi* at that."

"Exactly." Looking like something the dog dragged in, the last vestiges of his powers wrung out of him, Kikiou slowly got to his feet. He pulled Zhang's short sword out of his neck. "I should say the same about you. Perhaps better than even Ryuuki. And *I* am the one who taught him. What a waste. But exactly what I expected from the Elder's grandson. How about it? Wouldn't life with us be preferable to your own destruction?"

"Do you intend to make the entire world your enemy?"

"And we will win. Once Shinjuku yields to our firm rule."

"Where does such confidence spring from?"

"The fruits of scholarship acquired during our long voyages. And the knowledge of human stupidity. All the blood flowing through their veins is but a raindrop in the oceans required to satiate Princess. God could hardly forgive the pretentiousness of believing otherwise."

Yakou laughed silently. "I never expected to hear the name of God issuing from your lips. So you control this city—then what? Invade the outside world? This is just a head's up, but the ward mayor is a man with his wits about him. I would be surprised if he hasn't already informed mighty forces outside of Shinjuku about your presence here. Were Shinjuku to fall into your hands, there's a good chance that a minute later a nuclear missile would land on your head and vaporize you into your constituent atoms. Or do you want to put the old legends to a test and see if only sunlight and a stake through the heart will do the job?"

"Let us try it and see. The truth is in the legends. You know the meaning of *immortal* as well as I do. An eternity too long to stand. A final chapter that will

never be written. Making this world our own will not make our karma any more or less assured. But it should be an entertaining way to pass the time. So, what do you say?"

"What would you do with all the humans?"

"I hardly think it necessary to explain. Make of them our servants and our daily bread. Ration them out and they should provide for us perpetuity."

"Better you spend eternity on your accursed pleasure cruise."

"Hoh." The strange humming sound coming from inside his long robes made the derisive laughter sound even louder.

"Leave Shinjuku? Or die here? It's up to you." Yakou raised his right hand, the palm facing Kikiou. He drew in the energy of heaven and earth and using his body as a conduit, projected that *qi* at his enemy. An onlooker would have heard and seen nothing, as if the blue light filling the room came from the depths of space.

Power violently burst forth from the opposing corners of the room. The energy they projected at each other hardly disturbed the quiet. Yet bolstered by their unwavering wills, each competed to deliver destruction and death upon the other.

Kikiou thrust his staff at Yakou. Yakou's hand aimed at Kikiou's face.

The wooden door was clearly visible behind the old man. As was the room behind the young man. The unimaginable energy they were unleashing turned their bodies semi-transparent.

Some period of time between mere seconds and an infinity passed. Like a tug of war, the balance of energy began shifting toward one side.

Against Yakou.

Like an ascetic Zen monk tempering his spirit by standing beneath a winter waterfall, the young vampire clan head tightly shut his eyes in a trance.

In a similar state, Kikiou's mouth bent into a smile.

And disappeared.

Yakou slowly brought his left hand from his side alongside his right. The flows

of energy again balanced themselves out. This state of equilibrium might have gone on forever. But that wasn't to be the case. Yakou's chest slowly swelled. When it reached its maximum limit—

"*Yaaah—!*"

The cry—half of it breathing out the great stream of air—half of it a guttural scream—poured from his lips. At the same time, a similar cry issued forth from Kikiou's mouth.

The madly raging torrents cascaded at Kikiou. At Yakou. There was no telling which would find its mark. Perhaps both would simultaneously transform into some strange compound of iron and air.

Yakou's body was thrown backwards into the darkness. With no evidence of smoke or fire, Kikiou was similarly sent flying.

A second later, a beautiful sound echoed around the room. It hit the walls, struck the ceiling. A thin, belt-shaped piece of metal rattled onto the floor. A jointed, spine-shaped bar of iron.

Of the four men in the room, only one was not a vampire. This was the body that had sustained Kikiou for four thousand years. Using advanced technology unknown even in the modern world, the old alchemist had achieved the powers of the night dwellers.

The sad reverberations faded away. Yakou staggered into view from the opposite end of the room. Holding his left hand to his chest, he looked around. He picked up Kikiou's robe, miraculously unmarred, and flung it over his shoulder.

He looked down at the fallen Zhang and said in a low voice, "Your wish came true. I shall follow after you soon enough."

The body of the vampire—suffused with an unfathomable "spirit"—had turned to gray dust, leaving only the clothing behind.

"But wait a while longer. I still must uncover the wellspring of this counterfeit world."

The man—his face a whiter shade of pale—spoke the words like an incantation

and exited the room with unsteady steps.

The next day, not long after midnight. In a few more hours, the morning television shows would begin. But for now the world belonged to the night.

The machinery room in the third basement level of the Keio Plaza Hotel. The gloom filling the large space was saturated with the smell of blood, so much so that a few breaths would dye the viscera the same color.

Setsura was in the middle of it all.

The figure leaning against the lockers would put the most sought-after of male models to shame. Here where everything else faded to black, anybody capable of seeing him there would be entranced, while feeling too naturally inhibited to get anywhere near him.

But beneath that beautiful appearance, Setsura was engaged in a grotesque struggle with himself. The air itself seemed to turn to blood. He was consumed with the revolting desire to drink it into his lungs. The extent of this hunger was unimaginable.

So why seclude himself within such dangerous quarters? Perhaps in this battle of self-denial, he was using the cruelty of this environment to repress the devil within. The best shrink in Demon City would have a hard time figuring out what was going through this young man’s head.

He was the picture of the stereotypical young German philosophy student standing in the shadow of a linden tree, troubled by the anxieties of youth, his alabaster features suffused with dusk.

A dull sound resounded. Only Setsura’s ears recorded it. The elevator came to a halt. The door opened. A flurry of footsteps approached.

More than ten. The night hunters had returned.

The footsteps stopped. An unnatural silence followed. They must have detected the scent of blood and were reconnoitering the situation.

“Who’s there?” came a familiar voice through the door. Shinjuku Chief of Police Kumagaki. “You don’t need to answer. From the smell of things, everybody else is dead. I only know of three people in Shinjuku who could do

something like that. Galeen Nuvenberg?" The voice softened. "Doctor Mephisto?"

Doctor Mephisto?—

Mephisto—?

Mephisto—?

The name echoed around the basement level of the building.

"Or rather—"

The next moment, the creatures of the night silently scattered. With a blast of air, the steel doors blew outwards. With the crash reverberating through the ground beneath his feet, the Chief gazed at the severed hinges and finished the sentence.

"—Setsura Aki?"

In a gloom as thick as India ink, a new hole in the darkness opened its maw. They saw the silhouette in black waiting there as if upon holy ground. The floor beneath his feet was covered with fresh blood and the bodies of their headless companions.

"How's it going?" asked the unearthly beauty in a hoarse voice. In the realms of such aesthetic perfection, any voice would seem appropriate.

"Ah, it's going fine," said the Chief with a backwards glance. "I never imagined that such a world could exist. Now you're one of us, Aki-kun, part of this wonderful world where joy and sorrow and fear and loathing know no limits."

"Your job was protecting *this* world from *that* one."

Setsura gazed placidly at the Chief and the four vampires behind him. Three sharp-eyed detectives and one civilian. They wiped their mouths as their eyes met Setsura's, concealing their fangs and the clinging drops of blood.

"I suspected that things might come to this, so I inducted a few of my colleagues into the club and brought them along for the ride. *Get him!*"

The moment the Chief issued the order, his chest burst open. Reports of large-

caliber Magnums shook the air. Knowing the name and abilities of Setsura Aki, the Chief had his subordinates draw their weapons but keep them out of sight. But for some reason they were firing at him.

At close range, full metal jacket rounds would travel straight through a man's torso. It wouldn't kill a vampire like the Chief, but it sure gave him a start. Setsura pirouetted out of the way. The bullets struck the lockers behind him.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

The Chief whirled around and seized the cops by the shoulders. Blue smoke still curled up from the guns clenched in their hands. He grabbed one of the revolvers. An arm came away with it. The Chief stared at it flabbergasted.

All expression vanished from the faces of the detectives. Their heads separated from their necks and thumped heavily onto the floor, followed by a fountain of blood that coated the Chief's face. Kumagaki licked up the blood of his one-time subordinates and fellow creatures in ecstasy. The greedy look on his face continued even when his throat tightened intolerably.

Setsura asked quietly, "There's something I'd like to know—in your capacity as a police chief."

Other than the Chief, all had met the same fate as the detectives. Within the dizzying miasma of blood, the pained expression on his face was colored by an elation that was difficult to disguise. This bloody highway to hell was for him a scarlet Shangri-La.

Setsura observed his condition dispassionately. "How many of the city's movers and shakers did you make your prey? I'd like to know their names and positions. And their nesting places."

A scraping sound spilled unevenly from the Chief's trembling lips. It wasn't anguish. He was laughing. "You—you think I'm—I'm gonna talk? Go ahead and—and kill me. But first—how about giving me—a nibble—"

The next moment, his back bent over like a shrimp's. He bared the whites of his eyes. Sending the other vampires quickly to their graves could be called a kind of "compassion." But this was the torture that awaited the Chief. The black universe of Setsura's heart was beyond the understanding of mere mortals.

“You won’t answer me, Chief?” he repeated.

“Fine—fine—I’ll tell you—”

But before he could answer, the Chief’s chest swelled. His vest burst open. Along with what was inside it. As Kumagaki writhed in his death throes, a woman’s hand pushed out of his sternum, his heart clenched in her lithesome fingers.

Chapter Three

The Chief crumpled on the floor. Not sparing him a second glance, Setsura peered past him into the darkness. These new visitors had come this far without giving away their presence in the slightest, but he showed no surprise or fear at their arrival.

"Well done," said the white and willowy Demon Princess.

Strange praise, but perhaps she was impressed by this show of nonchalance. The Chief's heart landed with a *splat* at her feet. Her other hand covered the side of her face.

"See? Here is your opposite. We all finally meet."

She wasn't addressing Setsura. The tall man standing next to her smiled and bared his white teeth. And very nice teeth they were, coming to sharp points like the tips of a row of spears.

But even more frightening—inexorably drawing attention to it—was the overwhelming power of his countenance—the forehead like a rocky ledge, prominent aquiline nose, full lips and boulder-like chin all demonstrating an unshakable sense of determination—the embodiment of a powerful presence that would lay waste to any obstacle before it.

Contrasted against the rude features of his face were the thread-thin slits of his eyes. The physiognomy of this warrior was the product of a proud pedigree, born of elegance and raw power. Setsura could see well enough to discern the deep ocean blue of his eyes and the golden hue of his hair.

"But of course. Though surrounded by all of this sweet perfume, there is one man who does not frighten like a little rabbit."

His voice sounded like it was caked with rust. He spoke Japanese with a thick Eastern European accent. Despite the cramped underground quarters, it

reverberated like they were inside of a towering cathedral.

“Quite the man. I am not surprised that you get this pretty Princess so hot and bothered.”

“Idiot,” the woman hissed. The pique in her voice was palpable.

“In any case, I was let out of my cage to kill you. But let us introduce ourselves first. I am General Bey, Prince of Wallachia.”

“Setsura Aki.”

“You have a curious fighting technique.” General Bey swatted his hands back and forth as if batting away a cobweb. “Oh, you cut me.”

His palms were crossed with a pair of lines that quickly grew fatter. Setsura’s devil wires should have delivered to General Bey the same fate that befell the Chief and his associates. But this one would not be so easily dispatched.

A fierce red glow flooded from the narrow eyes. “I do not know the taste of my own blood, but yours looks delicious. After our scores are settled, I shall reward myself in full. It has been quite some time since I met a man who rekindled memories of battling the Turks at Targoviste.”

“Before we get distracted, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What is that?”

“Not you. Her.”

Fierce loathing filled the elegant eye adjacent to the hand covering her face—that he would address her in such a manner. Setsura showed no sign of caring what she thought of him.

“What did you come here to do? Or perhaps—”

“We came in pursuit of you,” she said coldly, keeping a tight rein on her emotions. Her limpid steel-black eyes, though, glowed from within like red rubies.

“I don’t recall being tailed.”

“Don’t play the fool. Who left those scars in your neck?”

Setsura stared at the ceiling and pretended not to know.

“No matter where you go, Shuuran will know where you are. When we dropped in on *that* woman, your location came to us on the wind. She’s in the neighborhood right now.”

“So a voyeur to boot.” Setsura sighed. Getting bit by one of Shuuran’s dolls was as good as being bit by Shuuran.

“There’s no escaping her, no matter where you go. Do you value your privacy? Check yourself into a room at Mephisto Hospital equipped with anti-telepathy shielding and see how far that gets you.” The woman smiled sweetly. “Those two aren’t there anymore.”

“Really?” Setsura said, making a surprised look.

“I don’t know how either. But they seem to have taken their leave in fine style. I had no problem breaking out of that hospital myself. What a joke this Demon Physician is.”

“I’m with you on that.” He held up a finger. “One more question. Before you broke out, you were in my room. Why didn’t you drink my blood?”

“Because I was rudely interrupted. And there was a more convenient substitute nearby. Making the lass my servant instead would surely make you suffer all the more. She appears to be quite fond of you.”

“Four thousand years of wandering about really brought out the bitch in you.” Setsura pressed his left hand to his stomach as he spoke. “So what do you do after you’ve turned everybody in Shinjuku into vampires? Our wise ward mayor has sealed all the routes to the outside world. One word to the Defense Ministry and they’ll answer with tactical nuclear weapons. Can you restore yourself to life after being reduced to your constituent atoms?”

“You think these last four thousand years have been all peaceful sailing?” Her fangs peeked out from the corners of her lips. “In the subcontinent now known as India, a king once caught on to our true natures. He had a weapon that spat fire, flew through the air, and when it touched the ground, burned everything in sight. I didn’t think he’d use it on us. I can still picture his green face when he became aware of our desires. But he was quite the man, too. He unleashed that bird of fiery death, consuming us, himself, his entire palace.”

“I have heard the legend of a nuclear war occurring in ancient India,” Setsura mused. “The Pushpaka Vimana could reportedly fly at the speed of thought using anti-gravity and teleportation, perhaps some sort of UFO. A weapon that reduced the populations of three cities to ashes, that bleached birds white, and turned food to poison—it was reminiscent of a nuclear missile. The site of the attack was Mohenjo Daro in the Indus Valley. Also called the Mound of the Dead. And the cause of it all was a woman? It’s enough to make a man weep.”

“And that wasn’t all.” The woman smiled. She spoke in a low whisper, but it could almost turn the darkness to ice. “We have existed in countless places and times and lived through all of them. Don’t you understand? War is the natural state of this world. If this world is truly a whole rather than the sum of its various parts, then it has always been at war with itself. Cities fall, forests burn, men and beasts die alike. We count it all a blessing. Death brings blood and blood rides on the wind. It steeps the water that quenches our dry throats. When the fires of war die down, it is up to us to fan the flames.”

Old memories came to mind and her eyes smoldered in ecstasy, the happy afterglow from a sweet past.

“Men and women alike are such delicious and pliable things. I bring my lips up to their ears, bite gently on the lobes, thrust in my tongue and murmur softly. And a myriad of soldiers pick up their spears and the blood flows like water. Do you recall what happened in France in 1572? That idiot Catherine di Medici inspired the Cardinal of Lorraine and his nephews the Dukes of Guise to launch a massacre of French Protestants. And who inspired her? Me. A Mongol chasing sheep around the steppes became intoxicated with me, took my will as his own, and invaded Western Europe. The color of blood is beautiful in every case, its taste sweet beyond belief.”

“The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and Genghis Khan,” Setsura said, more to himself. “In this city, your legions of pussy-whipped big shots have met their match. Besides, at any moment, the mayor is going to push the panic button. In the full light of day, Shinjuku’s citizens will hunt you down with wooden stakes. There will always be more where they came from. Maybe you should give world conquest a rest for the time being.”

“Bring it on. It makes no difference to me.”

“Eh?” responded Setsura.

“Ruling the world is Kikiou’s ambition,” she explained. “We don’t see eye-to-eye on everything. He remains a man of ordinary human passions. His unique kind of immorality is as well the product of his implacable tenacity. However, his desire is not to fill the world with his servants. But rather to govern all those lives of flesh and blood according to his own hand. As far as that goes, it’s fine with me.”

“I do find that surprising,” Setsura said, tapping his temples with his knuckles. He couldn’t have known that Yakou had just posed a similar question to Kikiou and received a completely different answer. “So what’s in it for you? Drinking blood is enough?”

“Exactly. I only increase the stable of my servants so that I may do with this world as I see fit. The means to that end do not matter. I only wish to live according to my own terms. Sleep when I want, satisfy my hunger when I wish, make love when the mood strikes me. Do you understand why I have increased our number only by two in four thousand years?” The woman’s glowing red eyes flashed at Setsura. “Because the more commoners I see and hear, the more attractive an eternal sleep becomes.”

“In that case, then why not leave Shinjuku as soon as possible? And go back to pulling the strings behind the scenes as you’ve always done?”

“The world is the same to me everywhere. Besides, I’ve taken a liking to this place. The smell of blood is different. I dream different dreams. Coming here has proved a real pick-me-up.”

“My, my. I guess trouble really is your business. Well, go looking for it and it will find you.”

“Enough with the chitchat.” General Bey’s voice shook the darkness. “No matter how much Princess fancies you, I have a job to do. You are standing in my way. The faster we settle things here the better. After five hundred years, now it is my turn to be free.”

“And what are you going to do about that?” Setsura asked blandly.

The emotions on General Bey’s face shifted for the first time. “Princess and I

crossed paths five hundred years ago in Constantinople. Whatever her reasons, I have been sealed away in a cell since, out of sight and out of her mind. Once you are dead, this city shall be my oyster. Pondering who my opponent would be, I knew he must be a man among men. More than that, one with the kind of power that makes the blood run cold."

"No need to worry about anybody turning coward and running away. This is Setsura Aki." The woman laughed like a ringing bell.

"That's me. And just so there'll be no fretting about hostages, return Miss Kanan."

"Hoh. You read my mind," the woman said, with a touch of admiration.

She undid the front of her *cheongsam*. Not starting at the top, but around her stomach. As soon as she undid the hooks, a white hand flopped out. It didn't belong to her.

A moment later, by means entirely unclear, all the hooks released. With a heavy thud, the naked body of a young woman fell onto the floor. Takako Kanan pressed her cheek against the concrete as if in love with its cold, midnight touch and didn't move.

Setsura looked only at the nape of her neck, at the lines of fresh blood flowing from the throbbing wounds in the bloodless, translucently beautiful skin of that neck.

"Don't worry. I haven't made her my slave. Yet. She needs but one more kiss. Until then she will sleep. Once you are dead, I will quickly send her after you."

Her shrill laughter stirred the blood-drenched darkness. And just as suddenly ceased. The transformation born in its place was accompanied by an outpouring of antagonism. The woman could clearly discern that the young man occupying this patch of black belonged to a different world from herself.

He appeared no differently than he had before. Only his essence had changed.

"Do not fear that I will take my leave of you now. On which stage do you wish to act out this play?"

He meant the place of their combat. His voice hadn't changed. Nevertheless,

this Setsura wasn't the same as the one before. He said, "Miss Kanan is with me."

"If you survive your duel with the good general, you may come and get her," the Demon Princess said with a thin smile. Her eyebrows arched slightly.

"Not here," General Bey said.

His voice grated like creaking hinges through the congealed, claustrophobic air. He had felt that *something* too.

"Where?"

General Bey pointed his forefinger up and down. "Higher or lower. Either direction. Where there's room to breathe."

Watching the two march off toward the elevators, the Demon Princess became aware that she was casually brushing her right cheek with her fingers. She took away her hand and looked at her fingertips. She could make out a color darker than night, like tiny red pearls.

Drops of blood.

Chapter Four

The elevator doors closed. This time it was General Bey who posed the question, “Where to?”

“There is no down,” Setsura stated plainly.

“Then up it is. What floor would suit you?”

“Do as you please.”

The general’s finger pressed the button for the roof. “If you wish to get off anywhere in between, now is the time.”

“And how about yourself, Kazikli Bey?”

The man’s somber face briefly registered surprise. “So you do know who I am. But then again, I should not be surprised that *you* would.”

“Ah, but you could have spent eternity in the palace of the Turkish Sultan, staring up at the endless sky. Why did you return? Did you come all this way just to see me?”

“Well—”

“And having found freedom in this city, what will you do?”

“Knowing what you know about me, you should not have to ask that question. That woman would not put it so crassly, but this place is overflowing with corruption and the stench of blood. There is no reining me in here.” He grinned toothily, baring his unsightly fangs. His eyes glowed red. “The more I see of you, the more you seem to belong here. It is no wonder that Princess hides her face out of shame. Even in front of me.”

A dull thud slowly rocked the floor beneath their feet. The elevator came to a halt.

“Where I come from, it is customary for the dead to leave the room first.”

Setsura walked wordlessly out of the elevator. The wind tousled his hair. They were on the roof of the Keio Plaza Hotel, five hundred feet above the ground. Few signs of the Devil Quake could be seen here, except for these dark and shadowed remnants of the supernatural.

Setsura approached one corner of the fence that enclosed the roof area. The black-clad figure seemed to light up. As if the Man in the Moon had decided to point the spotlight at him. Shinjuku Station and the surrounding buildings shimmered like tiny toys in the gaudy brilliance. Some parts of this city never slept.

Setsura raked his hand through his tangled hair. He returned to the center of the stage where the general was settling into a fighting stance. His left hand hung by his side. His right hand was tucked into the collar of his gold and silver embroidered robe.

“It doesn’t seem like the time for sightseeing. Feeling better now?”

There was no change in his voice. Setsura didn’t answer. The silence was an additional invitation to the scene of supernatural battle spreading out beneath the moonlight.

The general raised both hands to the height of his shoulders. If an onlooker squinted, he might see a faint, glimmering line—like a fine, wet wire—from his wrists to Setsura’s fist. The general had caught Setsura’s devil wire with his bare hands.

This confrontation was not going to end as those had in the darkness a short time before. The general’s arm—that had previously batted away Setsura’s wires—didn’t budge an inch. Drops of blood dripped from his wrists and from between his fingers.

“Where’s that bloodthirsty man from the basement who yet showed some sympathy for the devil? This man’s soul cuts straight to the bone.” The two points of light from inside the general’s skull transformed from demonic red to a raging scarlet.

“*Haa—!*” The roaring yowl burst forth from the black cave of his mouth.

Setsura leapt to his right. Faster than the eye could follow. Had it been visible and on public display, exclamations of praise would have followed. And though invisible to the eye, the transfixing afterimage of Setsura's elegant movements was left in the air.

Changing into one more shadow flitting through the darkness, he glided across the roof and sprang into the air. A silver line split the moonlight. Another shining ray flashed down and rebounded.

His black slicker resembled the wings of a magical raven. His countenance shamed the moon. But when Setsura again alighted on the ground, the hem of his slicker was mangled like the edge of a postcard pulled out of a paper shredder at the last moment.

A dozen yards away, General Bey said, "Nothing surprises me about you. That was your wire." He thrust out his bloody right hand.

Setsura's severed devil wire. Wielded by the general, Setsura's weapon hadn't been able to do the same. The same titanium fiber that cleaved muscle down to the bone had been severed by itself—and by somebody other than its true owner. What manner of man was this warrior?

Setsura still held the end of the devil wire in his right hand. It constrained the general's left arm, which became at the same time a shackle around Setsura's. Setsura had the use of his left hand, the general his right.

Given Setsura's greater familiarity with the weapon and the general's bloody hand—but taking into consideration his remarkable skills and talents and the compromised physical condition of the young man in black—both sides of this equation poised in a precarious balance.

"I saw your portrait in Innsbruck Castle," Setsura breezily observed. "A mounted knight at the head of his army. Now I understand why you did not carry so much as a pocket knife on your person."

"Live by the sword and you die when the blade breaks. Fight with a lance and you become a stuck pig without it. But make the weapon of your enemy your own and you will live a long, long time."

The general's voice flowed proudly through the night. Coming at the height of

battle, such a grand and solemn revelation was almost enough to make this beautiful genie forget the nature of the attack.

From time immemorial, it was said that in the furthest reaches of the forests of Eastern Europe—where darkness engaged daily with light—there existed a practitioner of the black arts, an outlaw knight who had cast away his soul and held in his hands secrets that made him invincible.

During the late sixteenth century, Gyorgy Thurzo, Count Palatine of Hungary, recorded in *A History of My Sister, Elizabeth* that she had been led into a life of depravity by a blond, blue-eyed knight, who ruled over her more thoroughly than the Devil ever did Faust. Wrote the Count:

> He had slender hands that in any other knight might invite derision. But face him once and he would without difficulty rob his opponent of his weapon and in the same moment use it against him with an identical skill. And by the same token, that man's wife—however praised as a rock of fidelity—would, upon being taken to the marital bed, sing like a bird and bay like a wolf and expire in ecstasy under the ministrations of those golden hands.

That was the very least of it:

> The diabolical nature of the training required to acquire these skills cannot be satisfactorily put into words. As evidence of his soulless state, after engaging in a degree of ferocity that left a mountain and river stained with blood, he trekked for ninety-nine days across the untamed countryside, slaying every man he met.

"*Haa—!*"

The gold and silver shadow vaulted off the earth. So did the black-clad young man. Moonlight scattered all around them—seemed to freeze solid—and then rained down shards of shattered ice. The two silhouettes switched positions, sticking their landings like two diamonds still locked in kimberlite.

They didn't move. Couldn't move.

"You are a beautiful beast," said the general, in a voice that sounded like a

growl rumbling out of the ground.

Each repelled the mutual midair attack of devil wires. The general sensed invaders attacking from all sides—the devil wires Setsura had cast with his free hand.

They floated suspended in the air, and then fragmented and fell to the ground. Reacting only to the blast of wind and shudder in the concrete when the general landed, these simple flecks of metallic thread transformed into whirling scythes.

The general's face, neck, chest, hands and feet were slashed with dozens of thin, black lines—that grew fatter and fatter. Setsura's fingers didn't move. The wires responded to his will alone, dutifully sawing into the general's skin, eating into his flesh, tightening down to the bone.

Setsura remained frozen in place, down on one knee. Ryuuki's malevolent *qi* smoldered in his gut and pounded him with agonizing chills and waves of nausea. He'd come this far on the strength of his intestinal fortitude alone. The powers of concentration required to face down an enemy of unprecedented strength pressed him to the limits of his endurance.

In that condition, the ability to predict the general's jump and landing point and then execute such a degree of martial artistry of those titanium strands was truly remarkable.

"That was fine work," the general said in a rasping voice. "For all my strength, I would die if I lost my head. But you are already fighting with a handicap. The time has not come for us to say goodbye."

Setsura heard a hard sound. The sound of steel eating into bone—the threads cutting through bone. The general's lips trembled. But it wasn't pain. It was glee. An expression of evil Setsura had never seen before.

The general raised his right hand and traced the black bloody line crossing his neck. Beneath the smeared blood, the wound left by the wire disappeared.

"I possess this ability too. That is why we who drink blood are called immortal. Though had this wound been inflicted by you in prime fighting form, you would have likely cut my head clean off. If you wish to make my beheading permanent, you must first make the body forget how to regenerate itself."

The general placed his right hand over his heart. The fingers sank into the skin, burrowing into his chest. Pain distorted his ferocious expression. Blood stained the silvery fabric.

With a guttural howl, he wrenched out his fingers. A thin line like a string of bloody beads stretched from his thumb and forefinger to his chest. Setsura's devil wire. It had penetrated to the bone. He calmly gouged it out.

"Nice piece of craftsmanship. Keen edge. If sleep ever comes for me, I would wish for a blade like this to finish the job. But before that—"

A sharp ringing sound sang through the air. Setsura sidestepped the strand of devil wire aimed at his feet and soared into the air. His left hand glittered. A faint line of blood bisected the general's face from the crown of his head to the tip of his jaw. But he only smiled.

It seemed that the dawn would never come. Five hundred feet above the ground, the demon combat spilled across the roof of the skyscraper. Setsura ran along the top of the chain-link fence toward the elevators. Beneath his feet the fence tore apart, vertical fissures yawning open like reptilian mouths.

The general sensed Setsura's uncertain steps through the wire connecting them. He pulled on that wire.





Setsura staggered and dropped his guard. He did not have an immortal body.

The general was about to send the killing strand at him when, for some reason, he looked up at the night sky. The moon was out. By the time he'd realized that Setsura had released his end of the wire, he heard it humming through the air at his neck.

A shudder of crimson fear. He was sure he was dead.

Managing a physical feat that would have been difficult with all his facilities intact demanded an unimaginable degree of self-control and force of will. Setsura Aki's devil wire followed the arc calculated to intersect precisely with the general's neck.

But then it tumbled out of its orbit.

In the moment before impact, a white ghost flew into its path. Setsura sprang away as well. The hilt of a dagger protruded from the left side of his chest, as if the white moon had planted it there. Just beneath the moon floated a woman, her other hand pressed against the side of her face.

Setsura fell from the soaring heights and plummeted to the earth, his black slicker flapping in the rushing air like a bird that had lost its wings. Princess watched until the darkness swallowed him up. She hovered silently in the sky. The wispy, ephemeral gossamer on her back fluttered in the wind.

"Close call," she said to the general on the roof. She made no attempt to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

"What the hell are you talking about? I only lost my footing." The general didn't try to get up. "More importantly, what happened to him?"

"He fell. I didn't detect any rescue lines."

"I will believe it when I see the dead body."

"No need. This hand stabbed him through the heart. Such a meaningless loss."

"He was bearing great wounds. And yet was capable of casting his wire at me thusly. Do not take this wrong, Princess, but the only reason your blade found its mark was because his struggle with me had already drained him of his life force."

“Whatever. He’s dead. The monsters down there are making a meal of him now. Kikiou will undoubtedly be delighted.”

“Where did he fall?”

“There.”

The general got to his feet and looked hard where her white finger pointed. He pressed his right hand against his neck.

“What?” Princess asked.

“He did not sever my neck but did cut my blood vessels. Here is the best evidence of that man’s skill. Who can say how long the blood will keep flowing?”

The general removed his hand. Princess focused her one eye on the spot. A black line cut halfway through his sturdy neck—otherwise a proud manifestation of his immortal, regenerative powers—from which fresh blood spurted.

“He was examining this place before he battled me. He might have planned his own death. I should offer him a prayer of my own.”

The general raised his left hand. From the tips of his fingers slipped thin, glittering strands of light. Princess watched as they scattered into the darkness from a gap in the chain-link fence.

Setsura wasn’t floating. Neither was he on solid earth. He was spread eagle, face up in empty space some yards above the ground. He looked like he’d suddenly been released from the pull of gravity, and the price of such sorcery was the weight of his own soul.

In reality, Setsura had fallen into a kind of suspended animation. With the dagger still penetrating his chest, that was the only way to keep from crashing dead into the ground.

The position, orientation, and angle of his body had all been calculated from a fall of five hundred feet, coming to rest on a single strand reaching from the hotel to the building facing it.

He’d cast that line from the roof of the hotel, from the perimeter of the chain-link fence, while raking his fingers casually through his hair and looking down at

the world. Not as an escape route. Setsura had considered slamming the general against it. Princess's intervention had necessitated repurposing it as a lifeline. He'd limited himself to one wire due to the general's powerful eyesight. He was as powerful an opponent as Setsura had ever encountered, so he couldn't be sure it'd go unnoticed.

If he had, Setsura would be shit out of luck now.

The single, micron-thin thread had absorbed the impact and supported his weight after the five hundred foot fall. It took all his powers of concentration to keep from dropping the rest of the way. In the process, he'd drained the last reservoirs of his strength and succumbed to this half-dead state. Move a finger, wiggle his toes, and the wire would bisect his body and send the parts flying.

He was a corpse on a string.

An entirely remarkable coincidence robbed him of his next move. A gremlin no bigger than a toad crossed the road beneath the splendid silhouette carved into the sky.

Before making it to the other side, the sole of a white shoe crushed it to jelly. The gleeful face delighting in the creature's squirming death throes—a sacrifice of sorts to the coming slaughter—belonged to none other than Shuuran. She raised her head. The Chinese girl saw Setsura suspended there in the air.

"Princess's telepathy told me that you were dead, but I didn't believe it. I came here to make sure. What a frightening man you are, Setsura Aki. But I will eliminate the cause of our distress. I will obliterate Sir Ryuuki's foe."

Shuuran reached into her hair. Her hand extended skyward. A flash of light shot past Setsura's head, cutting through his devil wire. He dropped to the asphalt. Shuuran extended her right hand. The arc of light curved around and flew back into her hand, as if inexorably drawn there. The silver comb gleamed in the moonlight.

"First, I'm going to rip out your throat. Then your head. And your arms and legs. You can wait in hell for us forever. But don't count on visitors anytime soon."

She walked toward him. Her feet abruptly came to a halt. Behind her a bird

sang. A cawing crow. Shuuran looked back over her shoulder.

A small silhouette approached from the direction of the Mitsui Building. At this time, in this place, it was unbelievable that any human being would come to meet her face to face. But the demon Shuuran drew her brows and stared at the girl walking toward her. The girl was wearing a purple satin dress. She didn't look more than seven or eight years old.

The ghostly animosity radiating from her ivory-white face told Shuuran at once that she was a creature no less magical than her, and an enemy. The girl continued walking forward. Shuuran waited.

A purple dress and a dark green Chinese dress. Eyes like the deep blue sea and eyes as black as a winter night. One on behalf of the black-clad genie and one on behalf of those mercenaries of the night.

Wagering without regret not only their lives but their souls, this was a once-in-a-lifetime meeting between an unnaturally beautiful girl and an unnaturally beautiful young woman.

"You're here representing Setsura?" Shuuran's voice rang across the half-dozen yards separating them.

The girl stopped walking. Her blue eyes looked up at the sky. From somewhere in the gloomy night came a man's hoarse voice.

"She came right to his side without even the courtesy of a phone call."

"In that case—" The girl again turned her eyes on Shuuran. "You are the one responsible for scarring his beautiful throat? That is why I despise living things of flesh and blood."

The girl was a doll, Galeen Nuvenberg's pretty little servant.

Part Two: Clockworks

Chapter One

Shuuran sneered, “What’s this? You’re not even human! I don’t know why you’re rushing to his rescue, but get in my way and you die. If you want to live, then leave now.”

“I was the last person to meet with him,” the doll answered in silky tones. The blue flowers on the front of her satin dress trembled. Roses. Did blue roses bloom anywhere in nature? No, but the large indigo blossoms glowing on her chest were definitely of the species. “When he returns from the dead, I wish to be the first person he meets. Get in my way and—”

“You’ll kill me? Do you know how long I have lived? I am Shuuran.”

“I do not have a name. Please remember me as the servant of Galeen Nuvenberg.”

Shuuran’s face went blank. “That name—I’ve heard it somewhere. It is definitely on Sir Kikiou’s list. Well, even better. I’ll hold onto you until your master comes to fetch you. As bait.”

“I cannot agree to that,” the doll girl said softly. “Moreover, I cannot allow my friend to suffer. You are the one who will go to her grave.”

A flash of silver hummed through the air and grazed the doll girl’s neck. The girl just stood there.

“Alas and alack.” Sharp canines peeked from the corners of the girl’s mouth. She closed the space between them. Her white stocking feet didn’t move. She glided across the ground. And raised her right hand.

“*Ah!*” Shuuran cried out as the familiar streak of silver slightly brushed her cheek.

Deflected by the doll’s hand, the silver comb disappeared into the eternal

darkness. Shuuran barely dodged the flash of light at her throat, found her footing, and leaped forward. Next came the sound of ripping cloth. The doll twined her hand into the front of Shuuran's dress and ripped away a large swatch.

Shuuran landed next to Setsura. A white patch of heaving flesh was exposed from her chest to her stomach. Her generous left breast shone in the entrancing moonlight.

"I underestimated you," the vampiress growled under her breath. A fraction of a second slower and that hand would have removed all the flesh underneath. "No mercy—"

A black rivulet fell from the line in her cheek. The fresh blood dripping from the wound left by the comb gathered on the ground in considerable volume. The blood spread out like a drop of oil falling into a pool of water.

"It's no time to gloat," said Shuuran, towering above the doll. "That blood is no ordinary blood. Look—that clay thing forming itself out of the solid asphalt. Oh, a human head. A human hand. A porcelain *doll*."

There was an ironic barb in that last word. It was indeed a human-looking doll. The same human doll that had engaged Doctor Mephisto in the Shinanomachi ruins—this time wearing Shuuran's clothes and face—rose out of the black and bloody mud.

"Pretty little girl. Let me give you a hug."

She vanished and reappeared poised at the nape of the girl's neck. The girl was a doll too. But fine glass tubes instead of blood vessels ran through her body, though which circulated a nourishing ambergris-like substance that granted her the facsimile of life.

The porcelain doll attached her mouth to the white neck like the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner attached itself, with a gagging-like sound. The girl froze. A jet of blue water shot up into the air.

Shuuran looked on and grinned.

A puff of smoke like a punctured radiator, a geyser of the doll's blood. Befitting this fairy tale girl, it created a rainbow in the air.

Another spurt. The porcelain doll sank its fangs into the girl's head. The girl shook her head, but the doll held on like a Doberman. The curls of smoke spun around dreamlike, climbing higher and higher into the sky, dimming the face of the moon.

"This is the end for you," laughed Shuuran, her voice rising to the heavens in a shriek.

At that moment, a different sound echoed like a reverse tide. The spectral haze shrouding the three of them parted to the sharp beating of wings. A black bird plummeted downward. Its sharp claws sank into the shoulder of Shuuran's doll.

The startled doll tried to leap away, but couldn't move its body. The girl held her legs. The raven crowed shrilly and took to the air, the two dolls dangling from its claws. Before Shuuran could react, it soared up and disappeared into the swirling miasma.

Shuuran glanced at the vanishing trail and immediately initiated another strategy. Drawing alongside Setsura, she reached for the dagger, prepared to deliver the finishing blow. No matter how magical a being, it shouldn't be able to survive being stabbed through the heart.

She braced herself to yank out the blade. A greenish clod came out of the sky and scattered in all directions, the pieces of Shuuran's look-alike porcelain doll turning back to clumps of clay as they fell to earth.

The sight distracted her for a moment. Then Shuuran felt a prick of pain on the back of her neck. She reached up to her neck and retrieved the object. A blue rose. She cast it aside contemptuously, grasped the hilt of the dagger and pulled it out.

"Die."

As she thrust down and felt the blade penetrate, Setsura's body and black slicker dissolved into a heap of roses.

"Still performing parlor tricks?" Grinding the flowers beneath her delicate shoes, Shuuran came to her feet.

The girl was standing on the road less than ten feet in front of her. Her body was stained from the neck down with her own blue blood. The black raven

perched on her shoulder. It was a weirdly beautiful and perversely cheery sight.

The girl laughed. A sound like an angel singing. She extended her right arm. The bird opened its beak and coughed up what appeared to be a wooden stake. The end was planed to a short point like a lance. How a regular-sized raven could store a stake two feet long in its belly was anybody's guess.

As the girl raised her right hand over her head, Shuuran flung the dagger at her. The girl's arm traced a broad arc in the air as the dagger buried itself in her left breast. Shuuran's lunge forward to throw the dagger left her off-balance and unable to move out of the way.

The stake rent the air like a flaming arrow. With a strange, soft sound it pierced her voluptuous chest and jutted out of her back. As she crumpled to the ground in a mist of blood, Shuuran heard the high-pitched cry of that sinister raven.



A man's face rose to the back of her mind. Behind him, the sun was setting on a vast and distant plain. He reached out to her. *Come with me*, he said to her. Shuuran knew that this was a desire he had harbored for two thousand years.

She nodded. The fulfillment of that long-hoped desire. "Sir Ryuuki—" And she quietly began walking to the west, toward the sun setting into the distant horizon like a scarlet Chinese lantern.

The raven peered down at the white, still face. "Did she say something?" it muttered in human language. "A person's name."

The girl shook her head. "You must be imagining things." She crossed herself. There were certainly other appropriate funeral rites, but that was all she was capable of.

The dagger embedded in her chest changed to a blue rose. It glimmered hauntingly, as if relieved to finally return to its rightful owner.

"So how's lover boy over there?"

The girl shot the raven a scalding look. "You shan't address him like that."

The raven flapped its wings in annoyance and floated up a few inches. "Well, *excuse* me. If it walks like a duck—"

The doll girl ignored it, took five more steps and squatted down. Setsura was lying where he'd fallen. He hadn't moved an inch. The hilt of the dagger still protruded from his chest. Poison on the thorns of the blue rose had tangled the thoughts of the vampiress Shuuran.

The girl pressed her ear against his chest and then straightened.

"Well?" asked the raven.

The girl said cheerfully, "The blade missed the heart. And before the dagger struck, his metabolism sank to the lowest possible extreme. No different than the dead."

"You can't kill the dead."

"There is that, too."

"I'm so happy I could cry an ocean."

“You shan’t make fun like that.”

The raven flapped its wings and soared skyward. “Whoa—” came its voice. “You’d better hustle. That woman’s blood is raising a stink. Those cowardly vultures are on the move.”

“I know that.”

The girl put her arms around Setsura’s waist. The servant of Galeen Nuvenberg possessed impressive magical powers of her own, and easily lifted up Setsura’s body.

“You gonna carry him home?” the raven asked, intrigued. “He’s lost a lot of blood. Isn’t lugging him along like that going to cause more harm than good?”

“We’ll manage. Once we get out of here, I’ll have a taxi pick us up.”

“You think a taxi will pick up a fare like you?”

“I think some will do anything for money. What do they call this place?”

“Demon City Shinjuku.”

“Then they must give rides to demons too.”

“Good point.”

A girl, a body and a bird—this strange troupe made its way towards Koshu Avenue. They had proceeded a short ways when the doll girl glanced back over her shoulder. There was already nothing to be seen where Shuuran had fallen. Steel-blue dust coated the tattered clothing. The silvery dust wafted to and fro in the breeze until it drifted over the street.

“Westward,” said the girl. In the direction of the wind.

“Yeah, to the west,” the raven replied.

Towards the setting sun.

Yakou took the incendiary bomb from the back of his belt. He hesitated. He couldn’t shake the vexing feeling that he was missing something important. After killing Kikiou, he’d searched the magnificent manor house for the enemy’s private quarters and turned up nothing.

All the doors opened readily. None required a key. The other two were

nowhere to be found. Finally Yakou resolved to trigger the explosive. Seeing that the Demon Princess had established her counterfeit graveyard here, the real thing must be present as well.

And so he descended to the first floor and primed the incendiary. What stayed his hands were those lingering questions about this world. This world—this house of cards the vampires had built—this phony Shangri-La. It seemed a great waste to burn down the manor house without knowing its true nature, without comprehending the clockworks that made the whole thing go.

Where was this in the first place?

The top floor of the manor house afforded a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside. The endless green, the crystal-clear blue lake, swiftly flowing rivers and crashing waterfalls. The distant, slate-blue mountain ranges. Over and over he had to tell himself that it was all an illusion.

It'd be naive to believe that knocking out a single pillar propping up the reality of this world would make the rest of the edifice fall over like a row of dominoes. That's what his intuition told him, what the DNA in the legendary blood flowing through his veins—the same as *theirs*—whispered to him.

And as long as this world was *not* utterly destroyed, *they* would continue on forever. Hence the vexing indecisiveness that caused Yakou to hesitate at the makeshift destruction of this makeshift world, even while brandishing the weapon intended to deliver the fateful blow.

The incendiary still in his hand, he exited onto the veranda and leaned against the railing. A scent carried on the breeze. The smell of flowers tickled his nose. This counterfeit world was sweet and fragrant. The wind raised ripples on the lake—hardly large enough to even be called a pond—and the deep blue of the water filled his sight.

A word drifted into his senses. Yakou slowly backed away from the railing. By the time he had straightened up, his thoughts had formed themselves into a concrete shape.

"They came on a ship," he said, with all the gravity of Isaac Newton catching the apple beneath the tree. "And yet there is no ship. Why is that? It could not fit on that lake. Why?"

He turned around, as if sensing a presence behind him. His eyes burned as they took in the manor house.

“It can’t be—but that is the only possibility. Or rather, what other possibility could there be? Perhaps I am not a citizen of Demon City after all. Here, the more unbelievable the circumstances, the closer they are to the truth. Yes, I shall put that supposition to the test.”

Yakou shouted with a steely resolve. He raised his arms. Unable to withstand the burst of colorless, odorless energy, a section of the railing silently crumbled away. He leaned over and picked up a piece of the wood. An ordinary piece from a loquat tree. Painted red.

“And still the wolf wears its sheep’s clothing,” Yakou said under his breath. He pushed through the door he’d exited from and went back inside.

He was in a luxurious living room. He looked around the room and then walked quickly to a bookcase along one wall and retrieved a round, golden censer, along with the chain, and put it into his pocket. It was a product of the Tang Dynasty. Incense could be placed inside a silver sphere engraved with the figure of a dragon. Hung around the neck or placed next to the pillow, it constantly surrounded the wearer with a mist of fragrance.

For what purpose were they parroting the look of a den of thieves?

Yakou hurried out of the room. He pulled the pin of the incendiary grenade with his teeth and released the striker lever with his thumb and tossed it inside the living room. There was nobody there to throw it back.

He spun around and descended the twenty steps leading to the courtyard. A sound arose like a howling wind. The windows and doors blew out. The flaming amalgam of thermite and napalm blossomed outward. The three-thousand-degree fire would reduce the manor house to ashes in less than an hour. Yakou was more interested as to what would become of this world after that, but now he had no choice but to retreat.

Kikiou said that the demon woman was on her way to retrieve Takako. Yakou’s feet kicked against the ground as he sprinted off. The blast of wind rent the back of his jacket, releasing his folded wings. In a few more steps, Yakou had taken to the air without any additional effort.

He didn’t stick around to confirm the results of the fire, but flew over the castle walls and sought out their place of entry. The lights went out. Yakou sensed that he was back inside the earth, in the grotto through which they had entered this realm.

Three had gone in. One returned. But this was no time for worry or regrets. The ten men he’d picked to guard Takako were the best of the best. And armed with the best. But he doubted any armaments would be useful against *her*. His grandfather could dispatch fifty like them without breaking a sweat, and she had killed him.

For the sake of their good name, Takako must not come to further harm. He had promised Setsura Aki—he who accepted Yakou and his clan as rightful citizens of Demon City—that they would protect her with their lives.

Passing through the grotto, the night descended upon him. He noticed one particular change at first. He took the censer out of his pocket. A blinding light flashed in his eyes. The material of the silver container was transforming.

“Of course.” He nodded confidently.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he took note of the dial of his watch. He’d entered the grotto four hours before, at nine-thirty at night. According to his watch, only three hours had elapsed. It was now half past midnight. Mulling over the possibilities and calculating in his head, he came to a conclusion in a matter of seconds.

“One hour passed from the time we arrived at their world until Kikiou was killed. As for the rest, time passed as it normally does.” Which meant that in their world time came to a standstill.

The moon hung high in the heavens. Yakou took a deep breath. He spread his wings, flexed them, and readied for flight. His supernatural senses told him that a massive and evil presence was closing fast on his position.

Chapter Two

Yakou spun on his heels and hid behind a nearby thicket. Seconds later, the figures of three people stood on the embankment above the grotto. It was a miracle that anybody could make it through Chuo Park to this spot—a miracle for anybody else but them.

Princess and General Bey. And between them, Takako.

The waxy white skin, the vacant—but somehow licentious—eyes, and more than anything else, the two black lines of blood draining from her neck to her ample chest.

Hidden in the weeds, Yakou ground his teeth. He was too late. Right then, a new hope welled up within him. His own vampiric senses told him that Takako hadn't completely changed into a vampire. But he couldn't very well go charging into the fray. Not only from Princess, but powerful vibes emanated from the warrior next to her as well. This was his first encounter with the supernatural soldier.

The three paused before descending the bank to the mouth of the grotto. They abruptly turned around and walked toward the copse of trees on their right.

He was trapped. As long as Yakou could sense them, there was no way they couldn't do the same. He couldn't tell if they were using Takako as a decoy. But as long as she was there, it wasn't bait he could afford to avoid taking.

Yakou emerged from the thicket and climbed to the top of the embankment. He didn't have to look very hard to pick out the three figures among the trees. If they kept on this course, they'd end up in the Juniso District in West Shinjuku.

He started running. His feet didn't touch the ground. His wings unfurled and he glided a foot above the ground. He soon caught up with them.

Takako was alone. The other two had unexpectedly vanished. Left to her own

resources, Takako would wander the park forever. She probably wouldn't last two minutes on her own.

The ground in front of her surged upwards. It reached Takako's height and split down the center. Lining the top and bottom of the widening, cavernous hole were millstone-sized teeth. This was a mouth.

Takako was about to walk right into it when something passed through her and was absorbed by the gaping mouth in the earth. A roar resounded like a big Chinese gong.

Takako stepped onto level ground. Yakou swooped down in front of her. "Hold on." He seized her by the shoulders and inspected the wound in her neck. "We're going to get out of this. Just hold on a little while longer." He took a step to the side. "I'm not running or hiding. Why don't you show yourselves?"

His command was met with silence, only the wind in the trees. Only the moon illuminating the desolate night.

"Why the reticence? If you don't make an appearance, then I'll take this woman with me."

Only the whispering of the wind. The strangeness of this response left Yakou feeling uneasy. Having suddenly laid his cards on the table like this—and taking the abilities of the enemy into account—they only came after the most desirable prey. The options he was left with were obvious.

He wasn't confident that he could hold his own. Neither did he think he would lose. It definitely wasn't in his nature to turn tail and run. But as long as Takako was here, he had no choice. With the wings on his back, he was sure he could escape.

Despite all that, his enemies bided their time. What were they planning? Yakou didn't have time to debate the issue. He had to act. He put his arm around Takako's waist—she'd just been standing there—and soared into the sky. Low-altitude flight would make him too tempting a target. If he didn't want a face-to-face confrontation, following the safest strategy was best.

The twisted trunks and branches of the trees fell away like a black waterfall. He slipped through the canopy and flew into the great dome of the heavens.

Takako unexpectedly squirmed in his embrace. “She’s coming—she’s coming—those red eyes—”

The calm evening sky became a desolate battlefield.

“She’s there!” cried Takako, reaching out with a white arm and pointing to the right.

The sublime brilliance of the moon hovered impassively over the unfolding field of death. Her body bathed in light, Princess hovered there a hundred feet above the ground. Her black hair fluttered. Even her scorched, scarred face appeared lovely.

This was the perfect setting for a battle of the black arts.

“So you came.”

“Where’s your companion?” Yakou spoke in tones no less fierce than the bewitching echoes of Princess’s words. Both of their eyes glowed red. “If he has the means to join us, then let us settle everything once and for all.”

“Hoh. A man of action. So unlike the Elder.”

“So *you’re* the one.” Yakou’s voice gained additional resolve.

“Exactly. I am also the one who killed Setsura Aki.”

“What?”

“That man is dead. Right now he is lying on the ground in front of the Keio Plaza Hotel. Food for worms. Although I lost one from our side as well.” Princess’s vampiric telepathy had informed her of Shuuran’s final moments.

“And who would that be?”

“A girl named Shuuran.”

“Somebody destroyed her? Who? She’s one of your servants, after all. I wouldn’t have thought she could be defeated so easily. Can you say for certain that Setsura Aki is dead?”

Princess didn’t answer.

“I’ll be on my way.” Yakou raised his right hand. “But let me offer one more correction. You did not lose only one. As you will discover when you return,

Kikiou is also history."

Princess continued to hold her tongue. Out of shock, Yakou surmised. But the next moment, her loud laughter rent the night air. Her whole body shook. Her hair all but stood on end like the demon she was.

The strange and off-putting vibe seized Yakou. His grandfather had also told him of this aspect of the beast's nature. Even taking into consideration the demonic powers that had sent him to his grave, he could not have imagined such a raw and unfettered display.

Because of Shuuran's loss. Or perhaps because—except that he couldn't have known about that.

The Demon Princess finally got hold of herself. "Kikiou is dead? *That* Kikiou? What marvelous news. If you indeed pulled off such a feat, then we all have cause to rejoice. But the bastard cannot die. We will all wither on the vine while he lives on and on until the end of time, futilely chasing his empty—"

"Dreams?"

"Dreams." Princess finished her sentence just as Yakou anticipated the word coming out of her mouth.

"I traveled to your world. I saw mountains. I saw your manor house. All dreams, I thought. That world. You. And equally ourselves."

"And what led you to that conclusion?" Princess scoffed. "Who decides that our world is the dream and the human world is reality? And if so, then what becomes of you? We and the humans have worlds of our own, but not you. You belong to both. And are truly alive in neither."

"That is true. And all the more reason that choices must be made. I choose the human world. And even to live in the light of day, if possible."

"Now *that* is a dream," the Demon Princess sang out coldly in the night air, her voice like the edge of a blade.

The time had come.

Yakou raised his right hand. The demon *qi* coiled like a spring, waiting to spring forth.

At that moment, a strange object intersected the space between them. It looked like a semi-transparent belt or band. It was a good ten feet wide, and long enough to cross the sky over Chuo Park like a belt across a fat giant's belly. Its entire length writhed like a snake.

This sky creature resided only in the atmosphere above Shinjuku.

Yakou leapt to the right. Princess also took defensive measures. Waves of *qi* shot out. The "torso" of the "belt" didn't show so much as a bruise. Princess's body was flung a dozen feet off.

Sensing the degree of recoil, Yakou permitted himself a small smile. Too soon.

"Good show!"

The scornful voice echoed down on him from above. Yakou looked up. The white dress swooped down, the tips of her feet aimed at his head. Still holding Takako in his arms, Yakou managed to dodge out of the way only by a whisker, and only thanks to his animal-like instincts and reflexes. He couldn't help but be impressed.

The powers of his *qi* hadn't done a thing to her.

"The only way to kill me is old school."

The ferociousness of her kick—the air pressure from which could have gouged the flesh down to the bone—dissipated and Princess rose up elegantly before Yakou. She licked her lips.

"Now it's my turn."

"Your skills are equally remarkable," Yakou observed quietly. "Except you can't kill me if you can't catch me. I will swat away whatever you send flying."

"If you were so talented, you would even repel light. But what about this?"

The woman's beautiful face twisted in an extraordinary obscene manner. Her white hand touched the collar of her dress. Several seconds passed. Yakou stood stock still in the air. There was no change in the murderous vibe linking the two of them together.

The Demon Princess's lips moved. "Let go of her."

Like a swirling current, a strange expression flooded Yakou's face. The pure, white streams of moonlight changed to a poison that would drive the human race mad. The alluring toxin even crept into Yakou's thoughts.

As if in accordance to the command, Yakou's arms slackened. Takako slipped out of his grasp. A moment later, Yakou got control of his senses and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist.

The Demon Princess bared her fangs and growled like a wild beast. "Release her."

Takako's naked body tumbled like a blossom though the empty sky, seconds later disappearing into the dense black canopy of the forest.

"She has served her purpose. For some reason or another, General Bey seems stuck on the woman and so I've dragged her along thus far. Well, good riddance. But you, my friend, are not escaping so easily."

In response to the smile on her face—that looked like it was painted on with an evil brush and accursed paint—Yakou did not retaliate in the slightest. It was clear that he was under some sort of hypnotic spell. But when and how? It seemed improbable that the grandson of the Elder could be entranced so easily, even by the Demon Princess.

She removed her fingers from her collar. "Let us go down."

Facing each other, they descended directly to the ground and stood on the pavement. The general's imposing figure appeared from the dark forest.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"She fell," Princess said shortly.

The general answered with a fierce look but said nothing. He turned to Yakou. "What do you intend to do with him?"

"We're taking him with us."

"To what end?"

"Stop asking so many questions. You've done what I brought you here to do. As promised, you may fill your gut with all the blood this city has to offer."

“That goes without mentioning. Starting tomorrow night, this city becomes my battlefield. Nothing would be more fitting to this place. What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Taking the lead, Princess returned the way she came.

A short while later, three silhouettes appeared on the ground beneath the moonlit sky. They stood in front of the manor house. The smoldering ruins of it were wrapped in blue smoke through which darted the occasional red tongue of flame.

“Nice job,” General Bey said sarcastically. “So what do you do about your safe house?”

“Don’t worry,” a voice responded from beneath their feet. Kikiou’s voice. Three pairs of eyes looked down. “As soon as I ascertained their illegal entry, I moved the sleeping quarters to another location as a precaution.”

Kikiou’s severed head appeared like a strange plant pushing out of the earth.

Chapter Three

"How are you feeling?" asked the doll girl in the dark blue dress.

"As well as could be expected," Setsura Aki answered in a thin voice that was nevertheless as strong as steel.

Setsura lay on the bed. His chest was wrapped in bandages. His black silk shirt hung around his shoulders like a cloak. The doll girl had brought him here—to the house of Galeen Nuvenberg in a corner of Takada no Baba, or Magic Town—after the previous night's battle.

The small stone house was filled with something that would never otherwise be associated with the lair of a wizardess—sunlight streaming through the bedside window and the skylight in the ceiling.

The doll girl smoothly leaned over and picked up a silver platter resting on a summer futon. "You haven't eaten much. Are you not feeling well?"

"I got stabbed right under the heart. But I seem to be holding up. At any rate, it looks like I'm not so immortal after all."

Setsura's voice was faint and low. As he had observed, such a wound would probably have killed the average human. And as he had observed, his once incorrupt body had again put on corruption. Had he still been exhibiting the symptoms of becoming a vampire, being gouged anywhere on his body other than his heart would prove no more severe than a bad scratch.

For all the good that being human once again meant, it could be seen as equally unfortunate. The "normal" Setsura had the ability to enter suspended animation. That hadn't been possible because his fight with General Bey had exhausted his stores of energy. He'd entered the realm of the living dead only after Princess thrust the dagger into him.

The physical functions of his body, already stretched to the limits, had risen to

the occasion in response to the dagger. But after that state was undone, the damage remained.

If the doll girl hadn't been there, Setsura might well have been unable to sustain the suspended animation and bled out. That's how powerful an opponent General Bey was. The only reason Setsura could arouse himself now and get a little solid food in him was because of the medicines mixed and applied by the doll girl according to Galeen Nuvenberg's mysterious wisdom.

"I'm sorry for not taking the time to thank you."

"Oh, it was nothing." The doll girl lowered her eyes—eyes the same color as her dress. Her needle-like eyelashes fluttered.

"What's this, what's this?" The black bird's face and wings poked out from behind the sooty old bronze lamp hanging from the ceiling. "Well, a piece of cake. You have me to thank. The girl handled the carnage as well as she could." Ignoring the blue eyes glaring at him, the bird continued. "Take a look at the bandages around his neck. The flesh beneath is hamburger. The carotid artery is held together with baling wire and duct tape. She stuck by you all through the night. I don't think dolls need to sleep. The medicine applied to the wound requires the harshest acids and toxins. She's covered it up with makeup, but her skin is all pockmarked and—"

The bird abruptly stopped talking and fluttered toward the ceiling. The doll girl plucked a strand of her golden hair and threw it at him. It drew a glimmering line through the air, parting its feathers.

"Hah! She'd blush if she could. What's so wrong about describing your tender devotions to the man you love? Besides, it doesn't look to me like he's going anywhere for the next day or so. I think it's time for a sponge bath."

"One more word—"

Apparently sensing that she was serious this time, the raven soared up to the skylight. It released the latch with a poke of its wing and slipped through the gap and disappeared into the sky.

"That raven is a gossip and a chatterbox. If its great-grandfather were still around, he'd be beside himself. It's going to catch a beating when the lady of the

house gets home."

"The raven has a great-grandfather?"

"Of course. Humans do, don't they? So do animals. Even plants. Human beings are hardly the be-all and end-all of creation. No matter how highly evolved it imagines itself to be, human civilization will strut and fret its hour upon the stage and then be heard no more."

"Huh. And *its* great-grandfather is a raven of some reputation?"

"He was supposedly the inspiration for that son of Baltimore, the poet and novelist Edgar Allan Poe, and his most famous work."

"Ah, a noble family," said Setsura with an easy smile. He winked at the doll girl, who was looking at him with upturned eyes. "Good job."

"Oh, it was nothing."

It was hard to believe that this man and woman had killed such an exceptional vampiress the night before. Setsura remembered everything that had occurred during his period of suspended animation.

"So, when do you think I can get out of here?"

"First thing in the morning, the day after tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, but I'll need to leave as soon as it gets dark."

"Don't be ridiculous. You will undo all of my hard work."

"Well, if any of my wounds open up, I'll head back here in a jiffy."

The doll girl looked at Setsura with silent eyes. "I would prefer not to go through this again," she said in an offhand manner, and turned around. The tray in her small hands appeared enormous compared to her small frame.

"Just a second," Setsura called after her.

"What's that?"

"Would you have a telephone handy?"

"There is one."

"Could I use it?"

“It is a rotary phone not so different from the one that Mr. Bell invented. It should do.”

“Tell Doctor Mephisto to drop by. I’ve got a few things on my mind I intend to share with the son of a bitch.”

“You know,” the doll girl said in a serious voice, “if you staged such disagreements in a theater, I am sure that you could sell every seat in the house.”

“Being administrator of a hospital is a tough job. I don’t think he would appreciate the publicity.”

“Proof of the depth of your friendship.”

“In any case, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I understand.”

“After that, one more number. The ward mayor. Could you bring the phone here?”

“Unfortunately, it is attached to the wall. Is there a message you wish me to relay?”

“No. I’ll have to talk to him myself. Sorry, but could you help me to the phone?”

“Of course.”

The doll placed the platter on the table and came up next to the bed. Using her shoulder for support, Setsura got out of bed. He looked up at the skylight. There wasn’t a cloud in the clear blue sky. The silhouettes of birds soared through the brightly-lit world.

“God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world. Only during the day.”

“Night will soon be that way, too.”

“Would that it were so.”

“Indeed.”

The entangled couple made its way to the next room and opened the door. The phone was attached to the living room wall. It looked more like something invented by a cave man than the handiwork of Alexander Graham Bell.

The doll girl pulled out a chair. Setsura sat down and dialed Mephisto's number. The nurse who answered sounded vaguely familiar. When Setsura gave her his name she exclaimed in surprise and lapsed into silence.

"Could you get Doctor Mephisto on the phone?" Setsura said. He waited. After listening quietly for a while, he replied, "I understand. But please let him know I'm camped out here at Galeen Nuvenberg's house." He calmly hung up the phone.

"What is his disposition?"

"He's apparently going to be holed up in the Resurrection Room until tonight."

"Is he operating on somebody again? Except that he won't even agree to see you—"

"The guy's as fickle as a feline."

"I can't help feeling sorry for you, Aki-sama."

"I think you've got the wrong idea about us." Setsura sighed. "Let's give the ward mayor a ring."

Between noon and evening of that day, things were happening that were out of the norm even in Demon City.

For every four fewer sightseers, souvenir sales went up five percent.

They, of course, knew nothing about a phone call from a certain young man to the ward mayor, or that the mayor had then directed a special unit of commando cops and armored personnel carriers to the Keio Plaza Hotel, where they took custody of a large number of corpses in the underground levels.

Some of the strangeness couldn't slip by undetected. A dampness rapidly suffused the air, and yet the temperature began to rise. At the same time, the Shinjuku meteorological agency detected an unusual eruption of cold air arising from the depths of the fissures that permeated the city, and issued dense fog warnings extending through to midnight.

In a shadowed corner of the ruins near Shin-Okubo Station, an itinerant collecting blood-sucking leeches for medical use came across a young woman lying on the ground. He took her purse, containing over seventy thousand yen

and four credit cards. But perhaps fearing she was some new species akin to Dr. Caligari's Cesare, a somnambulist who could predict a man's impending death, otherwise left her undisturbed.

Since returning alone from a local Chamber of Commerce meeting the night before, Saburo Nemuro, the proprietor of Tao, an old school fabric and kimono shop in Yotsuya Nichome, had come down with a minor case of anemia and confined himself to his bed. Shortly before noon, he instructed an employee to go buy thick curtains. By that afternoon, all the windows in his room were covered.

At the morning council meeting, the bigwigs in the Shinjuku city government convened to introduce a measure provisionally titled "Shinjuku's Strangest Women and their Odd Gratuities."

It was introduced for debate, where it was unanimously decided to reward information broker Yoshiko Toya (age unknown, weight approximately 260 pounds) with a pair of panties that would fit the hips of an African elephant housed at the Ueno Zoo.

The mayor and deputy mayor were absent.

The mayor's secretary, Hiromi Oribe, hid herself down an abandoned manhole and immersed herself in bloody red dreams. In the dreams she was ravished (on her back, missionary position) by a hulk of a Chinese man. He had a frame made of muscle fused to steel. His rugged chest crushed her breasts. Fingers that could easily tear her apart encircled her thighs and kneaded the flesh. She felt every inch of the heat and size and hardness of his cock thrust inside her.

Men like him existed to tear these ecstatic screams and shouts from a woman's throat.

She soared to that ultimate, transcendent moment. The poisonous seed shot inside her. A pair of fangs sank effortlessly into her throat. The flickering regret of leaving her old self behind was quickly transformed into a violent rapture that pushed every nerve to the limit. Hiromi pierced the man's thick neck with her own fangs.

Her craving and her hunger unleashed the torrid currents between her legs and the vulgar coursing of her blood—in volumes that could fill a swimming pool.

Ah, the joy of drinking it all down in a single gulp.

The licentiousness pouring from the corners of her mouth, Hiromi smeared the gushing blood all over her body to her heart's content.

Two sightseers returning to Kabuki-cho from Waseda Gate in Tsurumakicho vanished into thin air.

A gang battle turned into a free-fire zone on the street in front of the Pension Fund Association building. The three-way melee between the two warring sides and a third gang that had interceded to mediate was unusual enough. Stranger still was Kenichi Fuminori, leader of the gang known as the "Kawadacho Rejuvenation Committee," who, after getting perforated by at least seven .357 Magnum and .45 ACP rounds, fired back, gunning down Soji Yazawa and Juzo Miyakabe of the "Kanto Rising Dragon Gang" and Shozan Osumi of the "Great Eastern Alliance."

Despite the temperature being over a hundred degrees, Fuminori wore sunglasses and covered his face with a muffler, a long-sleeved shirt and gloves.

Officer Nobuyuki Tateoka, out of the Shinjuku police traffic division, was filing an accident report inside the station when the sergeant called him over and told him to visit the mayor's office at the ward government building the next day at ten in the morning.

Life went on, people following the routines of their daily lives without change, fully believing that they never would.

And when the sun went down, a person left Mephisto Hospital with places to go and things to do.

"There's a fog rolling in," said the doll girl.

Setsura didn't answer. The home of a wizardess, the air circulating as nature intended it, would not tolerate the presence of an appliance as crass as an air conditioner. Setsura had seen this coming several hours before the forecast.

"It is going to be pretty bad tonight. Like pea soup."

"Hiding the creatures of the night," Setsura mused aloud. He was still burning inside. Thanks to the medicine, he was recuperating ten times faster than normal.

But his fighting strength was at a low ebb. If General Bey attacked him now, he'd be a pushover.

"I am not looking forward to any visitors tonight."

"Not me. I will have to go even if nobody comes."

"You cannot," said the girl, seizing Setsura's shoulders.

A crisp, metallic sound rang above their heads. Someone had emerged from the depths of the fog befriending those creatures of the night and pressed the horoscope diagram-shaped doorbell.

The doll girl went to the door. ""Who is it?"

"Mephisto," a low voice answered. A voice that stood being listened to again and again.

The doll girl faced the door and asked, "May I pose a question to you?" Eyes like inlaid crystal certainly reflected the visitor's visage.

"Go ahead."

"Were you born from a woman's belly?"

"I do not know."

"Is your father your father?"

"Well—"

"Please come in."

She took a step back. The hinges creaked. White fog puffed from around the jamb of the door. The airy, ethereal haze suffused the room with a milky mist. The silhouette standing in the door seemed to suddenly condense out of the particles of fog.

"Where is the other visitor?" Mephisto asked.

"He is inside," the doll girl said, quietly stepping back into the hallway.

"I was told he called earlier. How is he doing?"

"Why would you think he is ill?"

"He would not be staying here for any other reason. He is quite fond of his

shop.”

“The paragon of a small businessman. But why is the good doctor covering his mouth with a handkerchief?”

“I blundered a bit on the dosing of a medicine. The musk on my lips is a tad too strong.”

“I find it quite pleasing. Please come in.”

“Excuse me.”

The doll girl watched as Mephisto strode across the transom. The fabric of her skirt softly rustled as she went over to the fireplace. A long sword lay on the mantel. The girl stopped and fixed her eyes meaningfully on the blue velvet scabbard.

“Hey.” Setsura sat up and greeted the white-clad doctor when he entered the room. “What are you hiding your mouth for? Been making out with the girls again?”

“I was mixing some drugs and made a mistake. At the moment, my lips are stained with wolfsbane.”

“I’m impressed that you’re eating your own dog food and all. But when it comes to strong poison, you’d better watch it. Have a seat.”

Mephisto sat down on a small wooden chair and peered at the patient.

“What are you looking at?”

“Who dressed you with those bandages?” Though muffled by the handkerchief, Mephisto’s voice still contained its bewitching quality. At the same time, the thin silk fabric of the handkerchief evinced no ripples that might indicate the drawing of breath.

“You just met her. No badmouthing my savior.”

“I don’t know the circumstances, but I would recommend she not make a career of it. Who caused all this damage?”

“A woman.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I can show my face in public again.”

“*That* woman?”

“Except that I was fighting her partner when I got caught flat-footed.”

The edge in Mephisto’s voice grew somewhat sharper. “And where is he now?”

“Probably with her. They make a devil of a combination.”

“Oh, somebody you know?”

The answer was delivered in as offhand a manner as the question was asked. “Kazikli Bey.”

“Unfortunately, I would have to agree with you on that score. I heard that his head was delivered to Constantinople pickled in brine. I would appreciate getting caught up on what was going on with you and the outside world while I was secluded in my cave.”

Setsura nodded. “But first, what exactly have you been doing in your cave? Don’t tell me you were treating patients.”

“I thought I indicated I was mixing medicinal compounds.”

“Hoh,” Setsura said sardonically. He pursed his lips, an image that was at once sensuous and utterly lacking in sensuality. Beauty governed all. The desires of every woman who wished those lips pressed against her own were as transparent as a clear winter’s night.

“I’ve been sweating blood tracking them down while you’ve been mixing perfumes in that air-conditioned wine cellar of yours. Labor-management relations around here leave a lot to be desired.” Coming from anybody else, it would have sounded like the height of self-conceit. Then he blurted out, “Mephisto, enough with the damned handkerchief.”

The air in the room grew distinctly colder. The cry of a crow somewhere in the distance could be heard through the skylight.

“This bother you?”

Two pairs of eyes met. Without any particular dramatic pause or gesture,

Mephisto took it off. Ah, a mouth that could turn the most banal of words into heavenly music, that a good half of the population of Shinjuku longed to attach themselves to. From that mouth protruded no unsightly fangs.

"Satisfied now?"

"Sure."

"Your turn."

"Not yet. What's with Ryuuki and Shuuran?"

"Would you be surprised if they ran away?"

"Not surprised, and not celebrating either. What happened?"

"I shall go into the details at a later date."

"I'd like to hear them now."

Grimly responding to the oddly obstinate Setsura, Mephisto said, "After you brought them to me, I spent most of the night holed up in the underground levels. As you know, it's isolated from the outside world down there. No technological or metaphysical communication can penetrate. When I finally took a break and went outside, they were gone. What would you have me do?"

"Stay after school and write on the blackboard a hundred times: *I apologize for letting the bad vampires get away*. Those two were the best shot we had at finding the ship. In any case, did you come up with any substitute drugs?"

"Of course."

Examining the bandages from Setsura's shoulder to the nape of his neck, Mephisto reached beneath his cape with his left hand. Between two of his slender fingers was a blue vial about as big as his thumb. Its size aside, there was nothing particularly unusual about it. The mouth of the vial was stopped with a cork, one of Mephisto's special touches.

"What's that?"

There was nothing identifiably unique about it, except that it wasn't likely that Mephisto would carry around a vial filled with ordinary water.

"Drink it and see."

“For me?”

“Not for *me*, but *thee*.”

Reaching out, Setsura stopped as Mephisto held out his hand.

“Hey—”

“You don’t have to right now,” Mephisto softly said. “But it may become necessary at some point. As long as you keep living in this city.”

Setsura shook loose the spell and took the vial. “Three times a day?” he blandly asked. “Before or after a meal?”

“You’ll understand when the time comes.”

At some point, Mephisto’s visage had become shrouded in a white veil. The fog creeping in.

“The mist cometh,” Setsura Aki murmured.

“I would now like to hear your side of the story,” Doctor Mephisto said quietly. He again covered his mouth with the silk handkerchief.

Part Three: Blood Red Hunter

Chapter One

The real estate broker said, “Not the kind of night where you want to go out on the town.”

He was a regular at En, the top cabaret in Kabuki-cho. “That’s for sure,” the impresario agreed. He glanced around the club filled with light and music. The band and a melancholy singer singing the blues. The customers. The chatter and playful shrieks of teasing girls playing hard to get.

And yet no amount of that bawdy vigor would dissipate the looming darkness. Even the sound of opening beer bottles was hollow.

He knew why. The mood inside the cabaret wasn’t ruled by the darkness, but by the night itself. Something from which no human could flee. This was the world bestowed upon the creatures of the night—by foolish gods who otherwise praised benevolence and fair play. Humans knew that wasn’t the world they inhabited, so they went to sleep, perchance to dream, and dismissed it all from their minds.

“The place feels down tonight,” the real estate broker said, massaging the back of his neck. “Mood’s flat as a pancake. Like everybody’s sitting around waiting for something to happen, you think?”

“Hard to say.”

The impresario looked away. Gazing upon his customers, he felt himself taking on their same expressions, and that worried him. When he turned around again, the real estate broker was gone. He greeted his other regulars and returned to his office.

At the door to the hallway, he found one of the busboys staggering back and forth. He looked about ready to fall over. He was obviously high and trying to walk it off. If he was, he was *so* fired.

The impresario approached him. “What’s up with you?”

“I don’t feel so good.”

“You doing drugs?”

“No.”

Like the kid would tell the truth if he was. He looked in the kid’s eyes. They didn’t look right. The pupils were dilated. It brought back memories of being in the boxing ring. The look right before the right hook delivered the knockout. But the vile light turned it into an overwhelming emotion. *Hunger*.

“You’re fired. Grab your shit and get out of here.”

“Sure,” the busboy said agreeably. He left the hallway swaying like seaweed in a tidal pool.

As he watched the kid leave, the impresario heard the sound of somebody crying. Off in the shadows, where the light barely dented the darkness, a girl was kneeling on the ground, her hand pressed against the left side of her neck. She had on a gaudy metallic lamé dress. She was one of his girls.

“What happened?”

“He bit me.”

The impresario was left speechless. But not because he didn’t understand what she was saying. This was Shinjuku after all. There were monsters there that sank their fangs into human necks as a matter of course. And there were just as many defenses to be employed against such behavior. The ward regularly held monster eradication campaigns and the impresario used a civilian exterminator just to make sure.

An hour before opening, specialists with cylinders of toxic compressed gas strapped to their backs made a sweep of the premises and thoroughly eliminated anything that didn’t belong. The gas could selectively target monsters at the gene-specific level with no harmful side effects on humans.

“You were bitten? Come with me.”

She looked like she wanted to follow after the kid, but accompanied him down the hallway. The fabric of her dress—absorbing the temperature of her body—

was cold to the touch. He cursed her silently. She'd gotten herself bitten by some *thing*. If she took a turn for the worse, she'd have to stop working. He should take her to the local quack just as a precaution, but the hush money would cost him for sure.

The girl stopped and knelt down again and wept like a silly fool. "It hurts. It's like getting stung by bees. He's so awful, that guy—"

"That guy? You were bitten by a human?"

"Yes."

The impresario quickly figured it out. That junkie busboy had tripped out on some bad shit and thought he was a lion or tiger or something.

"I'll get you to a hospital right away. Just wait here for a moment."

He headed for the employee lounge and yanked open the door. There was nobody in the room. Only the steel lockers lined up on the bare concrete floor. The weak yellow light felt strangely cold.

"Where the hell did he go?"

Hearing a hollow, metallic sound, he spun around. *In the lockers?* What was the little bastard up to? "Hey, you in there?" he called out. For some reason, he didn't feel like opening any more doors himself.

"Um—"

An answer. He could hardly believe his ears. "What are you doing?" he asked, raising his voice. "Cramming yourself in there?"

"Cramming myself in here? No place else is as comfortable as this. It's like going home. I'm going to spend all my time in here after this."

His voice sounded like he was chewing on a mouthful of cotton.

"Well, good for you. Now get the hell out here. We need to talk."

"About that girl?"

"Of course, you stupid son of a bitch!" the impresario shouted. "You don't go shooting up in *my* place. I'm calling the cops. Move your ass out of there."

"No way, man." From inside the locker, the kid's voice quavered with

laughter. The sound was both creepy and comedic. “I was the time of her life. Say, Boss, how about you too?”

“What?” The impresario felt every vein in his body suddenly constrict.

“Join in the fun and everybody will get where I’m coming from then. Just what a great place this little old locker of mine is. I’ll send ’em to cloud nine just like her. Come on down and get yours too, Boss.”

The kid stopped talking. The handle on the locker door slowly turned. The impresario backed away. Somebody caught hold of his shoulders. He twisted his head around and saw that it was a girl’s pale hand. His feet turned to stone.

“No running away, Boss,” the bitten girl said in a low voice that was even more ghastly than that of the kid in the locker.

The real estate broker left the cabaret and wandered over to the love hotel district. He was still a little woozy. He’d downed seven whisky and waters. He was plenty drunk without being completely wasted. All revved up with no place to go.

The street was crowded with bouncers, shills and drunks, voyeurs and window shoppers, tourists and women of the night. They shared the sidewalks with the beat cop on patrol and the mobile police officer perched on a motor sidecar. If someone screamed or an alarm rang, they’d be there in seconds, a few minutes at the latest.

The broker had friends who regularly arranged for private security firms to supply a dozen men—each packing serious heat—to shadow them within a radius of a couple of yards, and post armored SUVs around the block on the lookout for anything suspicious coming or going.

He carried a high-compression air gun—loaded with fuming acid—in a hip holster, and a dagger strapped to his right ankle. All par for the course in Shinjuku’s “safe area.”

But the longer he walked, the harder his heart beat and the faster his blood flowed. The adrenaline amped things up all the more. When he reached his destination and saw the “Closed” sign hanging there and the steel shutters shut, all his high anxieties turned fatefully foreboding.

He was the only one on the street. Without the joint's amazing blend of quantity and quality and price, nobody would visit this place on this street at night. But knowing that was cold comfort now. He'd have to go back the way he came.

He thought about the white-clad doctor he'd invited here a few days before. If they could hook up together again—

Rather than retracing his steps, he could get back to the main street faster by continuing in the same direction and catching one of the local tourist buses. The broker set off at a brisk clip. He crossed the street and turned the corner and came out among the ruins of the old high street.

The wide avenue ran down the middle of a collection of boarded-up stores and stands and turned to the left. Something prickled the nose of the real estate broker. A cloud like a white sandstorm flowed down the street. Curiously, there wasn't any wind. The broker coughed.

Several people were sitting in a circle in the middle of the road. A plume of electric light spread out from the middle of the circle, accompanied by the vibrant vibrato of a female *enka* singer's voice and the smell of cheap sake.

The broker knew this was a gathering spot for drifters and itinerant workers. They were an amiable bunch, and he'd chatted with them on occasion while returning home after closing time.

With a sigh of relief at the sight of them, he drew closer. Nobody in the circle moved. A half dozen feet away he called out, "Hey, just passing through."

For the first time, he noticed people lying in the middle of the circle. From their clothing, he guessed they were vagrants. The ones surrounding them had on polo shirts and blouses and linen jackets.

The broker froze in his tracks. Nobody inside the circle was moving at all. Not drinking, not eating, not talking. They sat there still as stones.

The broker came to his senses and backed away slowly. After five steps he turned and started walking. The hairs pricked up on the back of his neck, as if touched by an ice-cold brush. His senses were suddenly awake and aware, the vibe coming at him from both sides.

The broker whirled around. Pale blue faces stared back at him. A businessman with a combover. A middle-aged housewife. A kid with a punch perm. A shopkeeper type. The kind of people he wouldn't expect to be sitting around in a place like this in the middle of the night.

The real estate broker's eyes were drawn to their mouths. They were dripping with black. A thought flitted across his mind. He looked past them to the vagrants lying on the ground. His eyes went wide with shock.

"W-what's going on? You kill them?"

"Naw." The kid with the punch perm slowly shook his head. "We're just palling around. Somebody already ripped their throats out."

"You're not those Toyama sons-a-bitches, are you?"

"Give me a break!" said the office lady with the fake costume jewels in her hair. "We live in Yotsuya. You want to come with?" She laughed gaily.

Frivolous faces, dignified faces, young and lively faces—seeing the white fangs protruding from their lips, the broker reflexively backed away. Do nothing and he'd be next. He steeled his resolve and reached around his back and pulled out the air gun.

The vamps didn't budge an inch.

"Stay right there! No bullets in this little peacekeeper but it'll sure rearrange every other part of you. You want to see how immortal you really are?"

Making these threats, he confirmed that the safety was off. The magazine held twenty rounds. He could give them each two and have a few to spare.

A white-haired older man stepped forward. A mist-like substance erupted from his face. A denser white smoke arose as the upper half of his face melted. He reached up and stuck his fingers in the mush and yanked them out. The smoldering clump of flesh plopped onto the ground at the broker's feet.

The old man smiled back at him, a raw red hole ripped in the flesh of his face. "Hey, it'll be fine by tomorrow. Don't worry about it."

The gun spat out two more rounds. With smoke puffing from the middle of his chest, the kid with the punch perm grabbed the broker around the throat. Just as

his fingers began to tighten—

A terrifying roar made everybody turn around. Next to the body of a young woman stood the big burly figure of a man. His tunic was woven with threads of silver and gold that shimmered in the moonlight.

He roared again like a wild beast. He leapt into the air and landed in the middle of the ring of vampires. Blood immediately spurted from the necks of the housewife and the businessman. The bones of their spines crunched and their heads flopped back like the hood of a jacket.

Two rosy red beams gleamed in the night. The devil's eyes. The undead were suddenly gripped by rigor mortis. "W-wait a second," yelped the kid with the punch perm, as the hand tightened around his scrawny neck. W-we—"

"That woman is *mine*. You stole her. In my country, a man could leave behind a golden chalice and be assured no thief would walk away with it. Because *I* would not allow it. And that rule holds no matter what country I find myself in."



General Bey’s hand tightened like he was wringing out a wet rag. The kid’s eyes popped out and his head slumped to his chest. With a single swipe of his other hand, he tore off his head.

The general cast his eyes down at the petrified minions, and then at the high street to his left. “I like this place. I shall grant it the honor of being destroyed by Kazikli Bey the old-fashioned way.”

The brilliance of his shining red eyes deepened all the more. Above his head, a bird’s silhouette skimmed across the face of the moon.

Chapter Two

After summing up the situation to date, Setsura leaned against the pillow. Galeen Nuvenberg's secret curatives were doing their job.

"So one has left the stage," Mephisto said, without obvious emotion. "But there are still three plus one, and that one seems a formidable foe."

"That is for certain." Setsura closed his eyes. The ague in his gut reminded him that Ryuuki's demon *qi* was still hanging around. "He can read my next move before I make it. Not to mention that he's a true immortal. How do you propose handling him?"

Mephisto answered without hesitation. "Reason would dictate that the first blow must settle the contest. Strike down the part that cannot resurrect itself—the head."

"There's no guarantee that he won't grow a new one. As long as he's still walking around, there's no way we can settle things with the other three."

"If all you are going to do is bitch about our predicament, then go back to your shop and bake *senbei* and don't come out at night."

"Once we've wrapped up this business, I'll take that advice," Setsura said in a languid manner completely out of character with that of a brash, young Adonis. He could have an emotional breakdown and still look ravishing.

"This occurred to me before," Mephisto said in a way that made Setsura look at him. "But why continue taking on missing persons cases? The moonlighting is hardly a necessary aspect of your business."

"If a mind reader turns up among your patients, introduce her to me. I'd like to know myself."

"How about a straight answer?"

“You serious?”

“I am always serious.”

Setsura smiled. Even someone familiar with the depth and breadth of their friendship would find this an unlikely exchange. And all joking aside, Setsura smiling at Mephisto was so rare an event it deserved being put on an endangered species list.

He laced his fingers across his chest and said, as if reciting verse, “I hear a person’s voice.”

Mephisto just returned the look.

“I can’t say what kind of voice. Call it a sad voice. *Find me*, it says. *Get me out of here*. And then a client shows up.”

“The height of sentimentality.”

“Wouldn’t argue with you on that point.”

“And if you plug your ears?”

“Let’s say that I tried it one night. Stuck in earplugs and put my hands over my ears, went to bed that way and kept them there all night.”

“And did you hear *their* voices?”

“Ah—”

“What did they say?”

“That’s privileged information.”

“They came here looking for something. I do not imagine salvation was high on the list.”

“Then who comes knocking on my door? Is it them, or fate?”

The expression on Mephisto’s face took on an unusual hue. “You are one peculiar man.”

“I’m a citizen of Demon City Shinjuku,” Setsura softly replied. He lapsed into silence. The faint mist swept about his face and body like waves. “How about we get going?” he said.

Mephisto's eyes glittered. "Where to?"

"You forget about my job?"

"We have not turned up any clues about their safe house. Walking around in your condition will only accelerate your return to my hospital."

"You don't know anything?"

"Unfortunately no."

"What the hell did I hand over Ryuuki and Shuuran to you for anyway? How about you just stop admitting the bat-shit crazy ones after this, okay?"

Not waiting for Mephisto's reply, Setsura turned toward the windows opposite. Mephisto held his tongue. Perhaps he was feeling a bit sheepish that those two vampires went on the lam on his watch. Or rather, that what he'd told Setsura was a lie. By the time he'd secluded himself in the Resurrection Room, Ryuuki and Shuuran were already mingling with the crowds on the Shinjuku streets. It wasn't likely that he was ignorant of this fact.

And then there was Yakou.

He'd headed off to Chuo Park without a face-to-face with Mephisto. He wouldn't march off to war—at the risk of body and soul—and leave the director in the dark. Was Setsura saying he didn't have a clue?

Hiding his mouth, Mephisto looked at Setsura's back. His eyes were tinged with color. Red—red—ruby red.

The white doctor stood up. The mist did not move.

Ah, what are you after, Doctor Mephisto? The doctor's white shadow silently approached the lovely manhunter, not even stirring the air.

The red light vanished from his eyes.

When Setsura rolled over and looked up through the skylight, the doctor was sitting in the chair, still as a mannequin.

A knock at the door, as if the doll girl had taken note as well. "Come in," said Setsura. She entered the room and quickly came to his bedside and pulled on a thin cord hanging against the wall.

The skylight opened. Seconds later, its black wings beating back the night mist, the big talking raven flew in.

“Ah, as I expected. Everybody’s been waiting for me.” The raven had to stop and take a breath, having traveled here at top speed.

“Did you see something?” asked the doll girl.

The proudly pedigreed bird nodded. “I was putting in a few turns through the sky before settling down to sleep, and happened by a shopping district off Shokuan Avenue—”

As soon as they got out of the taxi, the steel scent struck their nostrils. The taste of blood in the air. This being no place to hail a cab, the driver offered to stick around. Setsura suggested that he’d better take off and come back in a few minutes.

He looked up. The raven wheeled about the sky over ground zero. Setsura turned to Mephisto behind him. “Hay fever?”

The handsome doctor had covered his nose with the scarf as well. He didn’t answer.

Setsura set off at a run. He noted that Mephisto wasn’t keeping up with him. He really didn’t have the legs for moving quickly across open ground. Glancing over his shoulder and urging him on, he quickened his own pace.

A number of bodies came into view beneath the light of the streetlamp. Vagrants and itinerants.

“What say you?” he asked without turning around.

“They are all dead,” Doctor Mephisto answered in his unflappable voice. “The middle three are completely drained of blood. For two of them, the wounds in their necks point to the primary cause. As for the other seven—”

Mephisto left it at that. Setsura sighed. If anything, the itinerants could be said to have died peacefully. Not so with the scene in the foreground. These were deaths a heartless man would not wish upon his enemies.

Two bodies torn in two, neck separated from torso. A body whose neck had been wrung like a chicken’s before decapitation. The disposition of the other

four corpses wasn't so straightforward.

Collecting them together under the caved-in storefront of one shop seemed an expression of the killer's whims. The four bodies were staked through with the exposed wooden posts, hovering there in the air like dragonflies pinned to a butterfly collector's box.

The beams penetrated their bodies through the back and abdomen with the clear intent of prolonging the pain. And, in fact, it hadn't yet ceased. Their limbs and trunks writhed back and forth, like bugs in their death throes impaled on a thorny branch by a butcher bird.

About thirty minutes had elapsed since the raven witnessed the events until Setsura and Mephisto arrived. These living sacrifices had been in agony all that time.

"Nice of you to show up," said an old white-haired man, trembling back and forth on the stake shoved through his gut. He coughed. Frothy blood poured from his mouth. "It's a real bitch hanging up here. Pull that thing out, would you?"

"Wow, those two are hot," the office lady gasped. "It's like a dream."

Despite her labored breaths, echoes of desire were clear in her voice. She should have died a long time ago. Her thighs jutting from her tight skirt wriggled as if of their own accord. If this was a dream, then she was part of the nightmare.

Setsura right hand traced a lazy arc through the air. Even after the heads had fallen to the earth, the torsos continued to squirm like haunted creatures.

Setsura pointed at the sky. "The bird says he went into a rage after they laid hands on a young woman that was lying there. His character certainly does seem to agree with the history and the legends. What do you think he'll do next?"

"I would expect a rampage," Mephisto said soberly. "He is a cancer born out of every evil this planet has produced. I do not expect there could ever be a cure. He must be eradicated with all due speed."

"That's some big talk there," came a voice behind them.

All the more remarkable that there existed something in this world that could

approach Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto from behind undetected—

They calmly turned around. Kazikli Bey struck his chest with his right hand. An old custom. To Setsura he said, “It is an honor to meet you again.” To Mephisto, “It is good to make your acquaintance as well, Doctor Mephisto.”

He spoke in a rough and uncivilized voice that seemed a stranger to grace and refinement.

“In any case, I control myself when and if the necessity arises. Amidst all these sweet scents, I steeled myself, expecting only to taste the blood of that witch who pulls the strings of the big raven. And behold my reward. What began two days ago shall be brought to an end.”

This last statement was of course directed at Setsura.

“All of your techniques I have made my own. The Doctor is welcome to watch.”

“I am afraid I cannot agree to that.”

“Hoh. You wish to take him on?” The general lowered his right hand from his chest to his side. The tone of his voice suggested that a face-off with Mephisto hadn’t been in the cards.

“We have known each other for a long time.”

“Oh, stop it,” said Setsura lightly. “We’re not such bosom buddies that we’re into that whole joining forces and killing people thing. Feel free to take a hike if I get beat.”

“I never know when to take him seriously,” Mephisto said, facing the general. “But if he says so, I shall respect his wishes and retreat to the sidelines.”

“That would be fine,” the general said agreeably. “Pitching in to help would be futile.”

“So I had assumed,” said Mephisto, quietly retreating to the store behind him.

“The air is sweet and the moon is high. I prefer a world ruled by wind and rain. But this is not a bad place to die. If you prevail over me, then I take it all back.”

“Much appreciated.”

Despite having already battled once right up to the point of defeat, Setsura was oddly at ease. With no overt signs of tension or fear, the two men faced off at a distance of a dozen feet or so.

“This really is a wonderful world,” the general said unexpectedly. “More than anything else, it has blood. It has life. And dark nights. Not to mention other pleasant diversions. Disco, for example.”

Setsura gaped at him. But from the look in the man’s eyes, there was no doubting that he was the real deal.

“All that music and movement—like it was all perfectly designed for drill sessions.”

“You’ve got a strange way of looking at things,” Setsura said, calculating the timing and distance between them. “You learn stuff like that aboard the boat? Who was it that sealed you up in there anyway?”

“When I was picked up in Constantinople, the ship was already sailing the world at will. That such a thing exists suggests a god who rules time or life itself.”

“If they were intending to protect you, then they shouldn’t have brought you here.”

“What are you saying?

“This is Demon City. Nobody leaves happier than when they arrived.”

“I do not intend to leave. Didn’t I just tell you how wonderful a world this is? Those getting in the way—”

The general’s voice hardened. Setsura heard a sound like a cracking whip. Blue points of light winked in the air. The devil wires thrown by them both entwined and entangled, throwing off sparks.

“Where did you get hold of that wire?” Setsura wanted to know. A sensible question.

“That is a weakness of limited creatures like yourselves. Everything in this world is patterned after something from a long time ago. This wire was found in an oil-filled pot in long-forgotten ruins in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Now

—you die.”

The wire swept at him in a slashing sideways attack. Setsura’s sliced through it. As soon as the end touched to the ground, it bent and rebounded. As this was his own technique, he dodged it easily. The wire flew above where his head had been a split second before like a spring, cleaving the air.

The sudden action opened up his wounds, throwing Setsura’s movements out of whack.

The ancient wire floated to the ground like frayed hair. A sideways shot of power from the side had disintegrated them into their constituent molecules.

The general and Setsura as well spun around in surprise.

“Hoh,” exclaimed Mephisto, at the appearance of this new opponent. He was still leaning against the shop door.

They all knew who this was.

“General Ryuuki,” said Setsura. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“I was in the Takada no Baba neighborhood. The smell of blood and my own two feet brought me here.”

“And what did you come here to do?” asked the other general.

They sailed aboard the same ghost ship, engaged Setsura upon the same orders, and both “generals” stared icy daggers at each other.

“That young man is carrying around a gutful of my penetrator *qi*. If you’re looking for a fair fight, you might reconsider after he’s rid himself of it.”

A scornful smile etched on his Romanesque features, the general focused his eyes on the graceful face of the man who’d addressed him. “If I didn’t know better, I would think this some demonstration of Oriental chivalry. Why settle for merely deflecting my weapons? Why not play the complete traitor and take his place?”

“Well—”

“Take a hike,” Setsura said quietly to General Ryuuki. He looked at the one-armed man with whom he’d already fought twice to death’s door with what

could only be described as gentle eyes. “This is my job.”

“You and I still need to trade our life stories over a drink or two. You’re in no condition to fight this man.”

“You might want to keep such opinions to yourself. Not that I would disagree with your assessment though.”

The general laughed loudly. “I am hungry. I am angry. And the taste of blood is fresh in the air. Let us engage. Either one of you, but the sooner the better. I shall take on both of you at the same time. That is fine with me.”

He had his arms folded across his chest. The fingers of his hands sang out. His invincible limbs incorporated the supernatural skills of his enemies in an instant and responded in kind. He had taken in Setsura’s devil wires. What would he make of Ryuuki’s demon *qi*?

The one taking a flying leap, like a silhouette falling on a shadow, was Setsura Aki. The demon *qi* released from Ryuuki’s hands silently soaked into the ground.

“You stay put.”

More than the pain from his wounds, Setsura tasted Ryuuki’s towering dignity in the rebuke. He stayed put. Bands of white rustled around his feet. It wasn’t the fog, but swirling bands of enlivened dust.

“General versus General, is it?” General Bey muttered, his words scattering in the wind. “How interesting.”

Ryuuki advanced toward him. Even the Demon Princess could not predict the outcome of this death match. Or more likely, the probability of their dueling had been beyond her imagination. But the two wizards could have no better stage for their contest, or a better pair of spectators.

The stage was Demon City Shinjuku and the audience was Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto.

“I have already learned all there is to know about your techniques,” boasted General Bey.

Ryuuki narrowed his eyes to slits. He didn’t sway or smile, show fear or

remorse. The moon shone brightly in the sky. Far away a bird sang. Its song was shattered by the waves of colliding energy.

"I am impressed," Ryuuki said with honest admiration for General Bey's skills. He once again raised his left hand.

The general did too. The sleeve of Ryuuki's right arm flapped against the air. The general's face twitched with confusion. His second blow vanished with the swing of Ryuuki's right sleeve. And the *qi* Ryuuki had flung at the general disappeared in the moment before contact.

All in the blink of an eye.

Sensing something else afoot, the general was about to jump away. A colorless, odorless shockwave of energy erupted from beneath his feet and engulfed his entire body. His limbs twisted weirdly and he was thrown violently on his back to the ground.

"You didn't get around to learning this one."

Ryuuki's demon *qi* did not simply radiate outwards, but could dissolve into the air and inject itself into the earth, even biding its time to attack from unanticipated directions.

"Better you go to that peaceful kingdom first. Though I have to say I'm a bit envious."

Ryuuki raised his left hand and began to lower it. An excruciating pain kept him from completing the gesture.

"No, I have already learned it."

General Kazikli Bey lay on the pavement and smiled. His ghoulish fangs glittered in the dark.

Chapter Three

Ryuuki's reeling figure reflected in General Bey's cold eyes. "You should know better than to doubt the power of the old magic," he said. He didn't try getting to his feet. He couldn't.

He had countermeasures of his own, but the hellish torment of Ryuuki's demon *qi* was enough to make even immortals long for death. Which of them would be the first to launch a second volley? And so the nighttime death struggle played out beneath the clear light of the moon.

"You will do nothing?" Mephisto whispered in Setsura's ear.

In the shadowed darkness, Setsura made no note of the soft red glow in his eyes. "Like what?" he asked.

"The torment Ryuuki's demon *qi* inflicted on you has now reduced Kazikli Bey to the suffering state of a mere mortal. I do not imagine he would put up much of a fight were a wire to wrap itself around his neck."

Setsura sensed the presence of the white-clad doctor on the back of his neck. "You want me to kill him, Mephisto?" A question no one else but Setsura Aki would even dare ask. *Does the Demon Physician desire another's death?*

"As long as General Ryuuki is General Ryuuki, he would not want such a thing, however much I do."

Setsura's words seemed to hang there glittering in the moonlight. But that was the wind-blown dust, trailing away from Setsura's feet like a comet's tail. Ryuuki fell to his knees. As if absorbing the energy from the impact, a long shadow rose up like wavering smoke.

"The night is the natural ally of those who live the life of the undead," General Bey said as Ryuuki knelt there in agony, "I, Kazikli Bey, will now grant you your heart's desire. Say your prayers to whatever god you worship."

He raised his trembling right hand. The fingers spread like a spider's web. Supremely confident, he filled his palm with the deadly energy.

"Stop!" called out Ryuuki, but not to General Bey.

The colorless, odorless energy mercilessly enveloped him.

"What!" Equally shocked voices sprang from two mouths, that of Setsura and General Bey.

There were dual reasons for Setsura's surprise. He detected the fatal blow surging forth and was about to cast out a strand of devil wire. But Ryuuki, in all his towering pride, knew what he was doing and would not permit it.

The fresh blast of evil power ricocheted around them.

The demon *qi* had *failed*.

Ryuuki stood on his feet shrouded by a white mist—dust sparkling in the moonlight. Who could have imagined that such a thing could deflect a technique polished over two thousand years to perfection? Setsura and General Bey and Doctor Mephisto stood there gazing upon the stunning, incomprehensible sight.

A rusty, grating voice reached their ears. "Shuuran—is that you—?" General Ryuuki addressed the ghostly, swirling dust.

Grasping the truth and meaning of his words, Setsura's face was flooded with a mixture of horror and profound emotion. Call it the love sonnet of the dead. Shuuran was in the dust. Shuuran *was* the dust, the same Shuuran who had tried to kill Setsura and had perished in the attempt.

Dust to dust she had become, and come to protect Ryuuki.

Demon City did not sing requiems to its dead. They would scorn Shuuran's devotions as a ghost's obsession. But at that moment, standing there like a comely shadow, the most befitting—and perhaps less than appropriate—eulogy to that perished life passed through the young man's mind.

As if pressed from behind by the moonlight, he interposed himself between the two generals. "I'll take things from here."

"Interesting," said General Bey, pressing his hand against his chest. "I do not mind. What does a few minutes matter either way? We shall all ascend to heaven

hand in hand. But what about him?" He meant Ryuuki.

Setsura said without so much as the twitch of an eyebrow, "I'll kill him after you."

"What a fine young man you are. I only wish we could have crossed swords back when I rode as a mounted knight."

The general laughed, his voice ragged from the effects of Ryuuki's demon *qi*. The bloody battlefield was his home. No one found greater joy in slaughter and carnage than those Carpathian soldiers that were his kith and kin. They called out to death, beckoned to it, celebrated it, worshipped it. Their struggles to the death would never end.

But this one ended sooner than expected.

From the end of the street and around the corner marched a bold orchestra of sirens. A formation of patrol cars. Beams of artificial light focused on the moonlit creatures.

"What's going on here?"

"Nobody move!"

The men shouted orders as they closed in on them. "How annoying," said General Bey, facing the onrushing police, his eyes glowing with a fierce loathing. "But this is a good enough time to bid you adieu. I am wounded. You are ill. We shall meet again. Nay, we must."

Scattering moonlight, the dazzling man retreated into the darkness. A strand of devil wire leapt out from Setsura's right hand, and was severed by one just as sharp. Just as the cops rounded the corner in force.

As precarious as the situation was, it was resolved without incident. The real estate broker confirmed that it was all the fault of the fleeing homicidal maniac. The unimpeachable testimonies of Doctor Mephisto and Setsura Aki were all that the cops needed to come to a definitive conclusion.

"Who's this?" The cop who seemed to be charge shot a sharp glance at Ryuuki, now being supported by Mephisto.

"A friend," said Setsura, and his word was enough.

The cop took down a description of General Bey, nodding his head and swallowing whole the story that they had quite coincidentally run into the villain.

“It is dangerous to be up and around at this time of night,” he said to Mephisto.

“It is indeed.”

“I can’t really put my finger on it, but when the sun goes down there seems to be a chill in the air, and you start feeling down and adrift, a strange sort of melancholy—”

Mephisto listened without interruption. The moonlight cast a soft shadow at his feet. Somehow indistinct, as if the ground under his feet were less visible than that under the police officer.

“It was like that yesterday too. And the same today. I spent my shift just driving in circles. I finally got out to take a look around. There’s something off even in the red light districts. The pachinko parlors, the peep shows, the head shops are doing brisk business. The streets are filled with pedestrians and music, everything from rock to John Philip Sousa. But still, something’s *off*. A different kind of civilian on the streets. And they never flag off. They look like normal folk, hang like normal folk, talk like normal folk. But look closer and they’re checking you out with eyes like ice. When you pass by, you get a vibe that pricks your ears up, a good one in ten shooting daggers at you. One of *them*. I don’t quite understand it myself, but there’s something alive in the world that’s completely different from you and me.”

“Precisely,” said Mephisto. “When people change, so does the world. But not all at once, for which we can count our lucky stars.”

“Is luck something Doctor Mephisto ever has to count on?”

“Was there anything else you needed of us?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re free to go.” The cop smartly saluted.

By now the street was thronged with ambulances and CSI vans. The three walked to a playground a ten-minute stroll away. In the center of this plot of land, devoid of any other life, the three faced each other. Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto against General Ryuuki.

An alignment perfectly fitting in Demon City.

“Why rush to my aid?” asked Setsura.

“Don’t you want to see me in the grave?” Ryuuki spoke in a low voice. Kazikli Bey had attacked him with his own demon *qi*.

“The real reason.”

“I am no longer with Princess.”

“You have fled. Shuuran is dead—or so we presume—but presuming so, Princess is now relying on Kikiou and General Bey for her defense. This is—”

Setsura was about to say, *a pleasant turn of events*. He swallowed the rest of the sentence. The reality was too hard to ignore. Nobody understood General Bey’s true power better than him.

“Where is Princess?”

Still cloaked by dust, Ryuuki laughed. “Do you think I would tell you? I may be an exile, but I am not a coward. Kikiou has told me of your true powers. If Shinjuku’s preeminent manhunter cannot uncover Kikiou’s cloaking mechanisms, then that world will never yield its secrets.”

“So I take it you won’t be spilling the beans.”

“This is a pointless conversation. My bones should have crumbled long ago in the yellow sands of western China. Princess saved my life. Even today, I cannot say whether that was a blessing or a curse. But the debt of honor remains.”

“Then why exile yourself from her?”

“I am not so certain myself. Perhaps because I am tired. Living by itself is a hard thing, and living an eternal life all the harder. Would you perhaps know the name of he who invented death?”

“What do you intend to do in the city?”

“Nothing, beyond living.”

“You know that’s not going to happen,” Setsura said, as a night breeze caressed his cheek.

“I know. You are the kind of man that belongs in this city. But neither will I go

down in dishonor. Bring it on."

Ryuuki reached out his hand. In his left hand slept the ghost koto *Silent Night*. A strange, indefinable, ghostly aura rose up between them.

A white hand also rose up to settle things. When it rested upon his shoulder, Setsura Aki didn't budge an inch. "What are you up to, Mephisto?" he asked.

"Let us call this off. Eliminating him solves nothing. And General Ryuuki's overweening pride might well prove perfectly fitted for this place."

"The craving of a vampire's bloodlust is as natural as sleep is to us. Doing without would lead to madness and death. He would surely seek out human blood before that happened, making no distinctions, the child and his grandmother alike."

Mephisto's voice fluttered like a butterfly in Setsura's ear. The fragrances it bore graced every breath the good doctor took. "You are not wrong. But you cannot know of that sweetness."

"Mephisto—" Setsura said, still as a statue.

"What?"

"Ryuuki has bitten you." The night deepened. The moon rose in the sky, more white and more serene. "I cannot imagine that you'd let your blood be taken so easily. So what the hell has gotten into you?"

"Whatever could you mean?"

"I mean the reason you would stick your neck out—literally." Setsura stepped forward, leaving only Mephisto's lingering white hand. "You can tell me later. For now, don't interfere."

Setsura sized up the distance between himself and Ryuuki and cast his devil wire at the upright silhouette.

A white shadow sliced through it.

Rather than repeat the attack, Setsura turned his attention to Mephisto. "Hey, I told you to stay out of this."

"I do not appreciate your acting in such a familiar manner with my *colleague*."

His *colleague*. Since when had he become Ryuuki's colleague? Or Ryuuki his? Setsura silently observed the thin red line running from the top of his head to the tip of his white cape—the attack intended for Ryuuki's body. Mephisto's eyes cast off a fiery glow.

"An attack like that could have killed the *normal* me." Would anyone other than Setsura have recognized the trance-like echoes in his voice? "But not so much now." The wound melded into the snowy white. "I have wanted to test my skills against your devil wire. Which would prevail?"

In the next instant, Setsura's neck was enveloped by a silver light—a strand of wire wrapped around his neck. The other end looped through the air and disappeared beneath Mephisto's cape.

Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto had finally faced off. One a manhunter and vampire hunter. One a doctor and a vampire. Who would carve the epitaph on the other's grave?

Mephisto's mouth twisted into a smile, baring his fangs. They were white and sharp. And beautiful. "I have to wonder, can you cut through it?"

"No," Setsura answered readily.

"I can slice or dice or garrote or strangle—shall we make it your choice or mine?"

"None of the above."

The ring tightened with a jerk. Setsura's expressionless face darkened. In a flash, Mephisto approached him with unearthly elegant strides.

"To say I am free to kill or let live is such a tired way of putting it, but I haven't the time right now to express myself more creatively. What say you?"

The two most beautiful countenances in the world stared at each other, mere inches apart, black pupils sucked into each other's voids, darker than the night, clearer than pure water.

If the moon could express a will of its own, these two faces—so close together as to appear as one—would drive it into a jealous rage. And yet would pray that they would never part.

As they seemed about to fuse together, a low moan arose from the paper-thin gap like a deadly miasma—Mephisto.

The black-clad manhunter drifted backwards from the white-clad doctor, standing there stock-still. The ring around his neck dissolved and returned to a simple strand of wire.

Setsura Aki said, his physique and countenance as comely as ever, “Mephisto’s wire cannot be cut but it can be undone. *My* devil wire in no way impugns the Demon Physician’s good name. We should all be able to agree on that.”

“Gladly,” Doctor Mephisto said coldly. “Neither would I wish to draw and quarter the ordinary you.”

“Hoh. Shall we become brothers then?”

“Ah, what joy such a relationship might bring. Would you be a friend? A colleague? The dictionary does not easily yield the proper definition in such a case.”

In which case, what might he have meant by calling Ryuuki a *colleague*?

“The enemy seems to have fled,” Setsura said, raising his right hand. “That would be your responsibility, Mephisto.”

“So it is.”

Setsura rotated his wrist slightly downward. Unseen and unheard, the devil wire it unleashed contained the power and will to sever the Demon Physician’s neck.

Mephisto ducked a hair’s breadth out of the way and spun around to the right. With every pirouette, another “Mephisto” suddenly appeared. One, two, three, four doctors in white surrounded Setsura, their capes flashing.

The devil wire shot out. And met no resistance. They were phantoms—or not. Steel filaments sprang out from the seams of the capes, skimmed past Setsura’s back as he dodged out of the way, and severed the concrete bench behind him like a slab of tofu.

“Not bad,” Setsura said to Mephisto from behind the bench.

Had a battle this pretty ever been waged before? The hunters all had the same

face and the same physique, and that somehow compensated for the pervading and uncanny weirdness of the scene. From high above, the moon looked down on the predators and their black beauty of a prey as if in a trance.

Watching as the Mephistos leaned forward and pressed their right palms against the ground, Setsura started to jump backwards.

The earth shook beneath his feet, followed by a powerful shockwave. The surface collapsed as if falling into a bowl, pulling the asphalt and seesaws and jungle gyms into the great divot in the ground.

The Mephistos stood at the rim of the thirty-foot-wide sinkhole that had suddenly appeared in the midnight playground, as if traced by a line connecting their hands.

One of them peered down airily into the bottom of the sinkhole. All the rest of the Mephistos vanished. In their places, half-foot long shards of wire jutted out of the earth.

The Setsura seriously attempting to remove Mephisto's head was Setsura, just as the Mephisto fully intending to bury Setsura deep in the earth was Mephisto.

The doctor in white stood above. The manhunter in black lay buried below, beneath a pile of rubble. Mephisto swept back his cape. With an indescribable look on his face he peered down at the black slicker peeking out from the side of a swing set.

He reached out his right hand, a slender hand that a beast would rather lick than bite. He was holding in his hand a coil of wire. "A death in the arms of the moon is altogether fitting. And I shall deliver the coup de grâce."

Gripping the coil, with his left hand he pulled out two, then three lengths of wire, forming a shining lance. A tribute to the dead, or his own personal predilection—attached to the long hilt was a flower finely sculpted from the same wire.

"I wished to spend one night with that other *you*. However, we will meet once again in the devil's palace in the sky."

He raised the spear. Overhead and very close came the cry of a raven. A dull thud reverberated against Mephisto's chest. Mephisto whirled around. A wide

blade protruded from his chest, precisely through the heart. It was at least a yard long.

Three shadows appeared next to the swing set a dozen feet away. The young blonde girl standing next to Setsura—sans his slicker—was dressed in blue like the ocean depths, like the quintessence of water itself.

"Bull's eye," said the big raven, perched on Setsura's left shoulder. It sounded surprised by the accuracy of the shot. But perhaps an understandable response by the witnesses to Mephisto's mortal wounding.

Setsura caught the blue velvet scabbard as it fell from the raven's beak.

"As I might have expected," Mephisto said, with a nod in Setsura's direction, and without the slightest inflection in his tone of voice or expression. His heart had been pierced by a long sword. That was all.

"*That* was your coat. I should have known better. The prospect of warring with you must have been so regrettable as to strain my eyesight."

"What a pity," said the doll girl, without an ounce of pity in her voice. "That Doctor Mephisto did not take note of me and this wretched raven tailing him is indeed a remarkable shame. Worry not. Aki-sama is doing fine."

"Well, not so much."

"What's that?"

The doll girl reflexively looked up at him. His countenance—pale on a good day—was bloodless to the point of becoming transparent, even sublime.

Pressing his right hand against his chest, Setsura said quietly, "The wound inflicted by Shuuran has opened up and continues to bleed. Whose quarters should we impose ourselves upon?"

"I am the attending physician," said the man who had just tried to destroy him. This doctor's mental make-up was a true mystery. "But who cast that spear?" he asked.

"*I* did," said that *other* Setsura.

"That is a relief. Not being able to dodge a spear thrown by a doll would have reflected poorly on me and my hospital."

The doll girl pursed her lips. “Speak for yourself.”

“Then let us be on our way,” said Setsura, stepping forward.

“No, I am afraid that here we must part. I have, as you might expect, other unpleasant tasks to tend to.”

Mephisto waved his left hand. His white scarf appeared. A moment later, the man and the girl and the bird were shrouded by a curtain of white. When it severed neatly in two and fell to the ground, the moonlight revealed only Mephisto’s absence.

“I guess I shall have to rely on your good offices,” Setsura said, looking down at the doll girl.

“She is delighted,” said the big raven.

The doll girl rested her blue eyes on it. “Even Doctor Mephisto has become a vampire. Find and follow him.”

“No,” said Setsura, stopping the bird as it started to flap its wings. “I know where he is going. The more things change, the more his world remains the same as it ever was.”

“Mephisto Hospital? Won’t that put you at even more of a risk?”

“Like I said, that’s the way things are. Shall we give the police a ring?”

“No.”

“I will go tomorrow. Until then, if you wouldn’t mind the imposition—”

“Not at all. You are welcome anytime.”

They hailed a taxi and drove to the home of Galeen Nuvenberg. Setsura Aki made his way to the bed he’d arisen from not that long before and collapsed.

The doll girl covered him with a blanket, and then busied herself in the kitchen brewing a pot of tea.

Part Four: Murderer's Row

Chapter One

The next day dawned to perfect weather. Beneath the kind of clear skies that sent the demons and monsters scurrying for cover—or so the citizens of Shinjuku liked to think—Setsura arrived at Mephisto Hospital like a beautiful black omen.

The receptionist blushed at his presence. Seeing the creature perched on his shoulder, her eyes widened.

In reply, the bird impertinently said, “What, Love, you haven’t seen a raven before?”

“Is the director in?” Setsura asked.

“Yes.” The receptionist nodded and accessed her computer terminal. “He is presently doing rounds. Please wait.”

The raven said in a hoarse whisper, “I like her. She’s got pluck. A vamp going to the doctor in the middle of the day is well-nigh unprecedented, even in this city. My owner’s gonna flip her wig when I tell her.”

The receptionist spoke briefly over the phone. She smiled. “Thank you for waiting. He just finished with his last patient and indicated that you should proceed to your usual examination room.”

The raven flapped its wings. “Tell me, Love, where’s Galeen Nuvenberg-san’s room? A girl about so high should have come last night.” The black bird spread its wings to illustrate the dimensions.

The receptionist gave the raven a hard look. The request coming from a *crow* notwithstanding, she again referred to her terminal. “Number thirteen on the fourth floor. A reserved suite. Ah, that’s the room the director just came from.”

After this, the bird’s attitude earned Setsura Aki a reputation among the nurses

as curt and overly familiar. Only reinforcing such opinions, the black-clad duo turned around and strode off without a word of thanks.

They exited the elevator, crossed the calm, quiet hallway, and arrived at the room. The door was already open. The golden-haired girl by the bed bowed to them.

"I'm still not ready to leave the hospital." The characteristic raspy voice was directed in part at the big raven.

Setsura Aki smiled what could even be called a sweet smile at this one-in-a-million witch sitting up in the bed.

"There is no cause for alarm. The doctor has done nothing untoward. I have been here through the night."

After treating Setsura's wounds and staunching the flow of blood, the doll girl had come straightaway to the hospital. Sunlight streaming through the lace curtains filled the room. The air conditioner hummed in the background.

"When did you recover?" Setsura asked.

"Yesterday, about this same time."

Setsura leaned heavily against the wall. However effective Galeen Nuvenberg's elixirs were, a few hours of rest were not enough to restore the body to complete functionality. His only consolation was that after he woke up, he'd made a call and learned that Nuvenberg and the doll girl were fine. But he hadn't expected the old witch to have awakened from her sleep.

"Please have a seat," the doll girl said anxiously, offering him a chair.

"Thanks," said Setsura, sitting down.

"The director has been treating me for a while now," the old lady said with a smile. She patted her stomach. "Still seems to be holding a bit of it in here. Apparently the same amount of *qi* as you and the Doctor. But so long as the physician cannot heal himself, you and I are out of luck. That is the kind of damage four thousand years of Chinese alchemy can do."

"So he treated you and left it at that?"

The old woman smiled thinly. "How very like him, don't you think?"

“Definitely,” Setsura said with a nod.

To Doctor Mephisto, turning into a vampire, Nuvenberg would be one of his fiercest enemies. By simply restoring her to consciousness, he was acting against his own self-interests. And yet he’d somehow drawn a line. If it was Setsura, he could begin to fathom the reasons. But the rest was unfathomable. That was unlikely to change. The true thoughts of others remained forever an undiscovered country.

“What of his wounds?” he asked the doll girl.

“I observed nothing out of the ordinary.”

“I’d want to see for myself,” said Setsura, staring up at the ceiling. There was physical pain as well. An ongoing battle with the *qi* dammed up inside, not to mention the stab wound.

“There’s a little something I would like to say first. The girl isn’t familiar with every aspect of the matter. Best to get it from the horse’s mouth. In any case, even so, when trouble like this strikes, you’re definitely the man of the hour. The man for this city and this season.”

Her eyes were suffused with concern. Setsura responded with a self-effacing laugh. “So what brought this on?”

A look of deep concern crossed the witch’s face. Setsura nodded. The sun was still high in the sky.

The men dressed in gray appeared at the Shimo-Ochiai water treatment facility. The few pedestrians barely took notice. Most of the ten men weren’t visibly armed, but only carried aluminized fabric rucksacks. Even the couple sporting flamethrowers looked like a fairly ordinary monster eradication crew.

They weren’t wearing ballistic vests or the all-purpose “sunscreen” that was equally effective against natural poisons. Whatever they were after, it didn’t look like it could put up much of a fight.

After entering the abandoned facilities, they opened the front of their jackets, exposing their greatest hidden “weapon” to the sunlight—small golden crucifixes.

They'd been distributed that morning in the hastily-established emergency underground command center. Their actual effectiveness, though, would only be confirmed after this.

Strange colored weeds sprouted in abundance around the site. They advanced with unhesitating strides and soon arrived at the staircase leading down to the filtration plant.

Two men wearing identical uniforms raised their hands. They were carrying, respectively, a heavy-duty flamethrower and bulky-looking laser cannon. These were members of the so-called "Cartography Division" that had the run of Shinjuku and was wont to be checking out places like this.

They'd conferenced with the "Disposal Corps" that morning, but on orders from the ward mayor, this patrol had been on the prowl for the last two days.

"What do you think?" said Tateoka, the squad leader, shifting the grip on the bag he was holding in his right hand. Up until the day before, he'd been a cop in Shinjuku's traffic division.

The younger member of the "Cartography Division" pointed at the widening pool of water below and the tunnel further in. "There's a bunch of metal lockers floating in the middle of the pool." He spoke in a hard voice.

"Have you confirmed the contents?"

"No. I'll leave that up to you. Seeing how it's pitch black in here."

Nobody laughed at such a bald declaration of spinelessness. Whatever they might have felt for their colleagues, the mayor had given them the cold, hard facts, straight and unvarnished. Not the kind of thing easily shook off.

"Let's go."

Tateoka had the team descend to the walkway ten yards below. With the flamethrower operator walking point, they advanced toward the tunnel. Along the way they came across the rotting corpse of a humanoid creature with webbed feet. One of them kicked it into the water.

At the entrance of the tunnel, Tateoka ordered them to don night vision goggles. From his bag he took a large crucifix.

During the day, the vampires would be sleeping in their “coffins.” But in the pitch black, they might be only taking a nap. And if somebody with insomnia became a vampire?

They entered the tunnel and continued on two or three hundred more yards. The lockers bobbing on the surface of the water appeared in their night vision goggles. The doors of many of them were open. A look of concern passed across Tateoka’s face.

“Let’s keep on our toes,” he said into his mike.

The team opened their bags and got out their “disposal equipment”—a hammer in one hand, a plain wooden stake in the other. They had already taken note of the offensive odor permeating the tunnel. It seemed to be spilling from a bunch of lockers bobbing eerily there in the water.

“What a stench,” said one of the men. He was a judo Fifth Dan, assigned from the Personnel and Accounts Division.

“The smell of death.” This giant of a man stated the obvious. He’d been plucked out of the General Administration Division.

“Round ’em up,” Tateoka said.

The men waded into the water and pulled the lockers to the shore. The stakes trembled in their clenched hands. Not a few would have to pry their fingers free once the deed was done.

“Start with the ones with the open doors.”

These makeshift, jury-rigged vampire hunters one by one leaned over the steel cabinet caskets. Startled voices echoed around the airtight spaces, filled with the smell of the grave.

“They’re dead!”

“They all have their heads cut off!”

“Open those cabinets!” Tateoka cried out in surprise. “Let me see!”

The same scene revealed itself to his eyes. The bodies in the steel coffins had all been beheaded. They lay there like decomposing sardines packed in the broth of their own blood.

“What the hell—!”

One of the hunters reflexively reached out his hand to touch it and then jerked it back with a guttural moan. The tip of his index finger had severed as cleanly as a jelly bean under a razor blade.

“Watch it! There’s something attached to them!”

That warning aroused in all their minds the much-rumored name of a black-clad young man. Another hunter had visited these precincts ahead of them. The vampires had come home to their roosts and had lain down in their beds, unaware of the devil wire strung across their pillows. And so silently went to their deaths.

“So what now? Burn them?” asked another soldier.

“That’s the orders,” Tateoka said in a tired voice, peering into the adjoining locker. The body of what looked to have been a woman of twenty-two or three. The decay had not yet set in and her white face still preserved its original features.

A peaceful face. They were all like that.

“Burn them.”

The orange tongues of flame and oily smoke consumed the lockers. All the men there closed their eyes and said silent prayers to their gods.

“Immortals that have been around for four thousand years?” said Galeen Nuvenberg heavily. The demon *qi* lingering in her abdomen was probably not the only reason. “They are certainly a remarkable bunch. Princess, Kikiou, General Ryuuki, Shuuran—not to mention Kazikli Bey. To the extent that they keep abreast of the times, they need fear no enemy.”

“The problem is the location of their realm,” said Setsura Aki, leaning back in the chair. “You don’t know either?”

“Well, consider my current state. Though the right person in the know might have a clue or two.”

Setsura leaned forward.

“An authority on Chinese history—the old gray matter is getting sluggish at

my age—let's see, Tomoko is the name that comes to mind. A scholar who works outside Shinjuku. She comes here a lot. I've met with her on one or two occasions."

Setsura got to his feet. "Here's to hoping you remember by the time I get back."

His next stop was Mephisto's office. Mephisto was sitting in his chair. Setsura glanced at him and said, "So where's the real you?"

This Mephisto smiled thinly. "Downstairs in the Resurrection Room."

"So you're doing rounds, eh? The director's dummy pulling a fast one on your own patients—Mephisto Hospital sure has hit the skids."

A hurt expression came to the facsimile's face. "I am doing as well as I can. I have no intent to yield in the exercise of skills to *me*."

"They were sufficient to cure Grandma Nuvenberg, I'll give you that." Setsura turned on his heel.

"Wait. If you're going downstairs, you won't find me there."

"You're getting annoying."

"I've got something to give you." Setsura faced him again. "Here."

A white square of paper fluttered in his hand. A sheet torn off the receptionist's memo pad. It was written with the skill of a calligrapher: *The enemy's hideout can be found at the west entrance of Chuo Park. I am headed there with two others*. It was signed by Yakou.

It was dated two days before, eight-thirty at night.

"Hey, Mephisto," said Setsura. "Did the real Mephisto happen to be in at the time?"

"No. I was."

That Mephisto had already been well on his way to turning into a vampire. That was when Ryuuki and Shuuran mysteriously went on the lam.

"No way I'm letting this slide, you quack," Setsura said, pointing his finger in his face. "I'll have your license yanked before the day is done. Wait here."

“It is a most unfortunate affair,” the Mephisto said, spreading his hands apart, as if asking for sympathy.

With a final, sidelong look of contempt, Setsura headed to the Resurrection Room.

Mephisto Hospital’s “Resurrection Room.” Only the director had ever seen what was inside. A sturdy iron door blocked Setsura from entering.

Assuming the size of the door was matched appropriately to the size of the person passing through it, that person would have to be almost fifty feet high and thirty feet wide.

It wasn’t a door meant for human beings. A great steel door powdered with a patina of blue rust. Strike the door knocker—a rivet the size of a baby’s head—and it should open to admit the visitor.

Standing in front of it, Setsura tried to remember what basement level he was on and gave up. He wasn’t too clear right now about where the elevator was, let alone how far down he’d come. There was only one thing he could do.

“You in there, Mephisto?” he asked the door. He waited several seconds. Hearing no reply, he said, “Open up, you dumb quack. Don’t think playing possum will convince me you’re not in.”

Several minutes later, the grinding of gears and the turning of wheels reached his ears. A thread-thin line divided the steel door vertically, slowly but inexorably widening as it opened outward.

The sound ceased.

The gap in the door was just wide enough that he could have slid in by turning sideways. Inside the door stood a white shadow. The silhouette was in fact dark as night but struck Setsura as white.

The figure was cut neatly in half. Or rather, his left-hand side was hidden behind the door.

“I am sorry about last night, Setsura-san.” The golden voice drifted on the air like golden honey.

“How big of you to say so, Doctor.” The vast echoes of this voice nevertheless

hummed like a silver string.

“Now and then it doesn’t hurt. Though your spear rather did.”

“And my coat got flattened under a boulder. This is a lender.”

“Galeen Nuvenberg must have thousands more stored away in her house. She has taken a liking to you. I must extend my congratulations.”

“You wanna come out here and talk about it? Or me come in there?”

“Keeping our distance is probably best for the time being.”

“So why did you let Ryuuki take your blood?”

“There were things I needed to know. Though that desire has been fulfilled.”

“What is there that you don’t know? I’ve got a few questions of my own. Vampire or no.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“Such as where they happen to be hanging out.”

“That is one of the things that I do not know.”

“They’re your crew now.”

“Ryuuki is the one who bit me. He was not at home at the time.”

“He drank your blood. Let a chap like him loose and what did you think he was going to do?”

“Not what you would do.” The graceful figure smiled at the young man, in no way his inferior. It was like a dream. “Have you forgotten? This is Demon City Shinjuku. The city where anything that can exist is allowed to exist.”

“Exactly. And neither can they escape all manner of gruesome deaths. Not even the monsters among us.”

Despite his grievous wounds, a fierce look passed across his otherwise vast and imperturbable face. Enough to silence even Doctor Mephisto.

“A city where you are free to rape and pillage. But don’t forget that this is a city that is free to destroy you in turn. A previous mayor proposed increasing taxes to decrease the debt load. That was enough to get his car firebombed. An

assistant director in the Social Security department got a bit too enthusiastic about funding geriatric care and got herself shot thirty-seven times for the trouble. A person's freedom can be bought for a pittance in this city. A human life isn't worth much more. Any big shot can secure himself a seat among the movers and shakers. But just as in ancient Rome, there is always that whispering in his ear that all glory is fleeting and the end is nigh. Not just him. That song is ringing in all our ears."

"In Setsura Aki's ears," said Doctor Mephisto's shadow, as the door slowly closed.

"And Doctor Mephisto's," Setsura Aki replied.

"I must sleep. You should get a surgical consult for that wound in your chest."

"Yeah, in this place I'd never wake up again." Setsura's voice followed the fading shadow. "I'm going to Chuo Park. See you around."

Chapter Two

Mayor Kajiwara wiped the sweat from his forehead as he walked into the mayor's office. He'd been nursing an upset stomach since he woke up. But once he took the medicine he kept in his desk, he'd be feeling on top of the world in ten minutes.

The secretary nodded to him when he opened the door. The girl had been sent over from the General Affairs division to replace Hiromi Oribe. She wasn't the equal of the woman she was replacing. Worse, the General Affairs section chief adhered to the old saw that beauty was inversely proportional to competence, and her looks weren't exactly inspiring either.

"Any visitors?" he asked.

"No."

"Calls?"

"No."

"Hold my calls for a while and cancel any meetings before noon. I'm not feeling too good."

"Will you be going to the infirmary?"

"It's not that bad."

Kajiwara went into his office. And stopped and stared. His secretary was either lying. Or was suffering from dementia.

Sitting at his desk was a Caucasian man in a khaki green uniform. The reflective lenses of his aviator sunglasses masked his eyes. But his features and frame suggested they were razor sharp. The mayor felt a flutter of unease in his chest.

"Um—" Kajiwara said, completely caught off guard. He casually reached for

the personal alarm attached to his belt.

“That won’t work in this room,” said a voice behind him. The door closed.

He turned around. He couldn’t help thinking of Easter Island and those towering stone Moai statues. Five men. Big men, all over six feet tall. More than their black, white, and Asian faces, their dress and equipment caught his eye.

Incendiary grenades attached to their vests. Handguns and spare magazines dangling from shoulder holsters. Beneath the grenades, hammers and wooden stakes and crosses. Strolling down the street in this getup was pretty much a declaration that the time for talking was over and it was time to go to the mattresses.

“Garlic cloves were originally attached as well.” The voice reverberating from the desk sent a shiver down the mayor’s spine. It was like he’d read the question on his mind. “But in an effort not to offend, the active elements were extracted and are applied prior to missions. On top of that, we wear custom-made coats and do our best not to overly excite the civilian population.”

The mayor looked at the speaker. The man’s resplendent moustache was hard to ignore. The stone Moais drew closer and he heard the sound of a striking match.

“Pardon the cigar. One of the few vices a military man can allow himself to indulge in.”

“No problem. Feel free to light up. Though for all your efforts not to offend, what’s with breaking into my office?”

“National security interests take precedence over individual concerns—a theory of governance that public servants everywhere are familiar with.”

“You don’t say.”

Kajiwara nonchalantly walked toward the desk. The panic button wired directly to security had probably been disabled as well. Though for the time being, he didn’t sense that his life was in any actual danger. He was praying nobody would say anything until he sat down. An unlikely wish to be granted, but Kajiwara felt that the angels were on his side this morning.

He sat down in his Niccolo leather executive armchair, leaned back and stretched out his legs. The vibe he carried about himself changed all at once.

“First of all, as the mayor of Shinjuku, I’d like to get all your names. You there with the cigar.”

The living sculptures dressed in military fatigues exchanged glances and pursed their lips in unison. These guys were only on edge when they wanted to be. These six were brimming with the kind of attitude that could turn a gloomy warehouse into a dance club by just showing up.

“Pardon our manners,” the cigar smoker said politely. “I’m Lieutenant Randall J. Matthews, Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces, Special Forces Operational Detachment F.”

More than the man’s name, Kajiwara’s attention was drawn to the division he was attached to. He did his best to keep the petals of anxiety from unfolding in his gut like a poisonous orchid, but knew he wasn’t entirely carrying it off.

With the JGSDF falling far short in its recruitment targets, the Ministry of Defense had established a special foreign legion open to citizens from other countries. As could be expected, the bulk of the applicants were mercenaries and ex-serviceman from other conflict areas around the globe.

As they were already veterans, the Ministry of Defense didn’t have to waste resources training them. Armed with the latest weaponry and sparing no expense, the foreign legion of the JGSDF could take on whatever impossible black op task the SDF commanders handed them.

The assassination of the subcommander of the international terrorist organizations, and search and destroy campaigns against the infiltrations of American organized crime families were par for the course. As large-scale conflicts grew into small wars, the ominous reputation of Special Forces Operational Detachment F – for “Foreigner” – spread like a cancer.

“So, what are you doing here?” Kajiwara knew the answer even as he asked the question.

“We’re asking for cooperation in eradicating the life form growing in this city —the vampires.”

Lieutenant Matthews spoke with the kind of confidence that contained echoes of flag and country. In stark opposition to them was the municipal seal of Demon City.

“How extraordinary. No mention of such things has reached my ears. And I can confidently state that no one is more sensitive to what is going on in this city than I. You must be mistaken. As there is no emergency that would require outside assistance, there is therefore no need to grant it.”

“Exactly what I would expect from the mayor of Demon City,” said Lieutenant Matthews with honest appreciation. “As stubborn and resolute as they come.”

“To be sure, there are the residents of the Toyama housing project, who feed on human blood and its substitutes. However, they are a mild-mannered and friendly bunch. They haven’t caused us a speck of trouble, as far as I know. Perhaps the information that reached your ears confused them with some other vampires.”

Matthews narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Excuse my directness, but are you really Mr. Kajiwara?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“According to our intel, Mr. Kajiwara is exactly the sort of person who would say the kinds of things you just did. Though I can’t believe that the real deal would be so ignorant.”

“Ignorant?” Kajiwara’s eyes lit up.

“Show him,” Matthews said.

One of the two black men in the room stepped forward and took a four-inch tube from around his neck and pointed it at the wall. A three-foot square of light appeared to hover in front of the wall. After a few adjustments, it focused into a clear image. The tube was a digital projector.

The video was taken in a dim underground room. A woman lying prone. The mayor felt a thump in his chest.

“What do you think?” queried Lieutenant Matthews. He tapped the ash from his cigar into his left palm.

“A pretty girl. Who is she?”

“Her name is Miss Hiromi Oribe. Your previous secretary.”

“That’s news to me,” the mayor said casually, the particularities of a certain recent directive rising to his thoughts. “Never heard that name before. You’re free to ask around. If somebody in the building has heard of this Miss Oribe and can identify her as my secretary, I’ll gladly yield to him the chair I’m sitting in.”

“You must play a helluva hand of poker.” Lieutenant Matthews smiled, as did his colleagues, flashing their white teeth. Broad smiles, no brooding hints of darkness.





Kajiwara looked at the screen with a disinterested, almost sleepy expression. It looked like it was shot down a manhole. Next to Hiromi, black water pooled on the floor.

“Let’s fast forward,” said the black man. The image wavered.

Hiromi’s eyes glowed red. She sat up vigorously, and then settled back down again. She looked at the camera. Sharp fangs protruded from her soft lips. Perhaps taking note of the cameraman, she smiled with an air of satisfaction.

Kajiwara let out a long breath. He felt as if the stench of the grave had suddenly invaded his nostrils and cleared his throat reflexively.

“That’s awfully rude of you.” Hiromi spoke through the projector’s speaker. “Taking pictures of girls while they’re asleep. Come here, you little fool. I’ll give you a good hard spanking.”

The voice resounding in the mayor’s ears was the music of the night. If her parents were here, they would stop their ears and avert their eyes. She would never speak like that, they would insist. This was no child of theirs. But a wild beast—and then slowly, inexorably turn back to the thing that wore the exact same face as Hiromi.

Her eyes glittered. Her fangs scraped against her teeth. “Here.” She beckoned with her hand. “Come here. I’ll show you the most wonderful dreams. Dreams nobody else has ever seen. No need to eat anything against your liking. No need to make the beast with two backs. You need only drink from the spring of life and live forever.”

The image teetered and shook, the cameraman responding to the invitation.

Kajiwara was aware that he was gripping the arms of the chair. He felt himself rising out of the chair, but resisted the impulse. And not only him. The soldiers in the room all had their hands clenched by their sides. Even after intense mental training, resisting the siren call of the vampiress took an enormous amount of intestinal fortitude.

Hiromi’s face filled the screen. No matter the revulsion it aroused, there was no denying its beauty. This might well be the very manifestation of being released from every moral bond and fetter in this world.

Her fangs and raw, red lips drew even closer, and then suddenly pulled back. That strange beauty vanished from her face, replaced by shock and pain. The cause was the two hands holding the wooden stake in her chest.

A crucifix was thrust into the side of the image. It wasn't necessary. And why the undead would succumb to such ancient, ordinary methods that everybody was familiar with—the man wielding the stake probably didn't know himself.

With movement devoid of conscious will and intention, Hiromi fell backward into the water. The splash rose high into the air.

From the corner of the frame, the man bearing the crucifix approached the submerged Hiromi. He had an axe in his right hand. He placed the crucifix on her forehead and raised the axe with both arms. The movement was cold and mechanical, betraying not an ounce of feeling or sympathy toward the victim.

The axe swung in a descending arc. Kajiwara averted his gaze.

"That's enough," Matthews said sympathetically.

"May I ask you something?" Kajiwara asked quietly, letting out a breath.

"What's that?"

"How did you go about finding that unfortunate girl?"

"For the last couple of days, we've enjoyed the services of two specialists from the SP Division at the Ministry of Defense."

"SP Division deals with espers and clairvoyants."

"That's correct."

"This is the first I've heard of this particular incident, but has news of other victims like that young woman reached any other ears?"

"What happens in Shinjuku doesn't stay in Shinjuku—far from it. As an object of curiosity and inquiry, it is constantly in the limelight. I'm sure you know the actual numbers, but the money spent by all the investigators passing themselves off as tourists makes up a significant part of Shinjuku's economy. I'd hardly be surprised if everything simmering away in this pot boiled over one of these days. It's not a possibility the outside world can turn a blind eye to. Those two SP personnel took a ride around Shinjuku and checked out the cribs of the victims.

As a result, the decision was made to act now before they started multiplying and things really got out of hand."

"If you are indeed the first to arrive, I would hope you would be the last."

"There are almost a hundred more of us in reserve. But in order not to waste resources and lives, and with respect to your wishes just stated, we're looking for your cooperation in resolving things as quickly as possible."

Kajiwara had closed his eyes and listened quietly to what Matthews had to say. When he was finished, he asked, "Lieutenant Matthews, who do you answer to?"

The big Caucasian stared off into space for a moment. "The SDF Chief of Staff."

"Incorrect. The prime minister appoints the Chief of Staff. And the prime minister is chosen by the ruling coalition. The ruling coalition is put into power by the vote of the electorate. Thus it follows that you ultimately answer to the will of the people."

"But of course." Matthews nodded with an amused expression. The men behind him smiled as well. But any air of honest joviality had vanished from the room. "And your point is?"

"My point is that your true superior officer isn't your captain or even the SDF Chief of Staff, but the general public. Would it be that great of an exaggeration to say that the nation's hundred million citizens have authorized you to exterminate the residents of this city?"

Lieutenant Matthews made no attempt to counter this absurd logical syllogism, despite the grave manner in which it was delivered. At length, an atmosphere appropriate to the duly-elected occupant of this office and his uninvited guests pervaded the room.

"Well, enough with the sophistry," Kajiwara said in a soothing voice. "However, no matter what decisions your superiors decide to hand down, the law of the land gives me the authority to refuse them. Namely, according to Tokyo City Ordinance 98, Article 3, *The mayor of Shinjuku Ward shall wield the same jurisdictional authority as every other ward mayor, and all decisions made to that end are entrusted to his discretion*."

The lieutenant said impatiently, “You left out the qualifying amendment. Ordinance 98, Article 3a: *However*, *if and when it is determined that the peace and common welfare outside Shinjuku Ward has been affected by conditions inside Shinjuku Ward, then the rights granted in Article 3 are hereby revoked, and the authority of the Tokyo City mayor shall take precedence*.”

“Huh. I see you’ve done your homework.” Kajiwara folded his arms across his chest. “But now that it’s come to this, let’s lay all our cards on the table. You failed to mention Article 4, which states that, *The judging and sentencing of all crimes and like conduct committed in Shinjuku shall be entrusted to Shinjuku, and not to the judicial authority of the city or neighboring wards*.”

“That is—” the lieutenant started to say, a slight smile on his face.

“Let me finish. It goes on to state that should the article in question be revoked in the future, it shall nevertheless come into force as originally drafted when and if the stipulated conditions arise. When push comes to shove, this city does not condone the outside world meddling in its internal affairs. So it would follow that we would feel no overwhelming obligation to kowtow to the directives of your superiors.”

“And if we insist?” Lieutenant Matthews pressed quietly.

“You do get right to the point.” Kajiwara leaned way back in his chair. “For the time being, we can recognize the validity of each other’s position. I have still to ascertain the nature of this cooperation you speak of.”

Matthews smiled. “Flexibility is an essential characteristic for a leader. That one trait can help to avoid a lot of needless deaths. Children won’t be mourning the loss of their parents.”

“And?”

“You are already aware of our goals. Speed is of the essence and time is short. They own half of the day already. From sunset to sunrise, while they mingle among the living, detecting them is impossible. For the next week, we would advise the mayor to issue a dusk to dawn curfew. That will give us a period in which we can carry out our mission.”

“We are not dealing with fools. They’d know exactly what you intended with a

curfew like that. What do you do if they stay sealed in their caskets?"

To this obvious question, Matthews replied, "People don't need to go out to eat, but they do. All the authoritative accounts make clear that vampires are driven by an unimaginable hunger. They may live forever, but not without quenching such desires. They must go out."

"How many of their resting places have your espers detected?"

"Nine. But that is hardly all of them. They are on the patrol again today."

"As I mentioned previously, supposing—just supposing—that things are as you say they are in this city, there could be well over a hundred of these cribs. Do you really think you can take them all out in a week? They will have also constructed defenses around their sleeping quarters. And probably seek out new safe houses on a rotating basis."

"I agree completely." Matthews took a deep drag from the cigar.

"Not to mention that you don't fully understand their powers. If people don't go out, they could force their way in. Wrangle invitations when and where they have to. You could simply end up exposing the citizenry to more danger."

"We've considered that as well. When it comes to destroying vampires, I think that the old school methods are best here too. I'm talking decoys."

Kajiwara sat there quietly. The reason Matthews had shown up here was finally becoming clear. He didn't have high hopes for success, but he wasn't eager to get into a debate about it.

"And these decoys—I suppose you will be providing them?"

"No. There are only six of us. Even if we spread out, one crib per man, we'd need an equal number of decoys. That's where you come in."

"Feel free to bring them in from outside."

"In this city, you're the decider. Everything rests on the shoulders of the ward mayor. You made quite the stand on that issue just a few minutes ago. That we work for the outside world is pretty much branded on our chests. This falls right into your lap."

"Huh," Kajiwara responded with an intrigued look in his eyes. He folded his

arms. “Do you have a prototypical victim in mind?”

“Young and attractive, of either sex.”

“How many?”

“Three per night. We’ll work in teams of two.”

“Can you guarantee the safety of the decoy’s body and soul?”

“If that’s what it will take to clinch the deal.”

“Then make it so.”

“I understand.”

Though neither of them believed that this was a done deal.

“Well, then, tomorrow at this same time?” A long, silent moment, as six pairs of eyes looked back at him. The mayor of Demon City smiled. “What?”

“Exactly what kind of hand do you think you’re playing, Mayor?” The question sucked any lingering hints of congeniality out of the room. “We came here in good faith. And you have yet to take anything we’ve said seriously. If you’d like to see how we usually deal with uncooperative partners, we’d be happy to demonstrate.”

“Aside from whether sending three lambs to the slaughter on a daily basis qualifies as an act of good faith, I believe my answer was precisely to the point,” Kajiwara answered without even the twitch of an eyebrow. His chair was his throne. And he was the mayor of Demon City.

“I don’t know what your superiors are thinking, but Demon City is home to living human beings. Living in whatever manner they see fit. I’d be the last one to deny that we might have a few oddballs among us. But as long as they are residing here, they are residents of this city. Let me hasten to say that I’m not drawing lines in the sand here. There are plenty of individuals in this city without papers, valid ID cards or passports. Perhaps even more of them than us. Those who recognize the right of people like them—no, let’s call them *living beings*—to be here are no other than their fellow burghers. I rather take pride in that.”

The mayor settled back in his chair and tented his fingers on his chest.

“Not only me, but a predecessor who was arrested many moons ago due to the misappropriation of public funds. And the mayor three administrations back who was entrapped with wine, women and song by an opposition faction. They all share this same sentiment. Nobody comes to this city with hopes for a rosy future blossoming in his chest. And nobody leaves suffused with newly-found happiness. Without exception, all who choose to live here are accorded the rights due them as citizens of this ward. As long as they choose to live here, we will do what we can to protect them. The philanderer tells that to the embezzler. The embezzler tells that to the tax cheat. The tax cheat got himself half blown to bits by a vengeful electorate and told me that on his deathbed. Look, no matter how noble your cause, no matter how much power you flaunt, as long as it’s coming from the outside world it goes into the circular file. This is Demon City Shinjuku. What may make sense elsewhere won’t pass muster here. You get where I’m coming from, I hope? Think it over and get back to me. And don’t give me that same old line about how everybody out there’s so concerned about the vamps getting out of control.”

This man, who based on mere appearance looked no more menacing than a weekend rent-a-cop, cast off a powerful aura that left the six soldiers speechless. The powerful *qi* ruled the mood of the room until, unexpectedly, another force rose up like a bubble in a pool of water.

The mayor noted that Lieutenant Matthews had his finger pointed at his temple. “I’d assumed that showing due consideration would be the best way to a conciliatory resolution. But it seems we have underestimated the people of Demon City. From now on, we’ll be doing things our way. And when Demon City turns into a real hell, that’ll be on you.”

The lieutenant spoke with the cigar still clamped between his lips. He yanked it out of his mouth and snubbed out the glowing end in the palm of his right hand. The sparks scattered and the smoke curled into the air.

The mayor narrowed his eyes as he stepped forward. “There’s no sleeping from now on. This city will never experience another peaceful night.”

He threw down the gauntlet and turned around. Kajiwara heard the startled cry of the secretary from the outer office. She really hadn’t seen them come in after all. He let out a long sigh just as she came running in.

“Who—who were those men?”

“Calm down. Just a few old drinking buddies.”

“But when—?”

“Apparently they can walk through walls as well. In any case, I’ll be in the office all day. I want you to place a priority on getting hold of the following two people: Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto.”

Chapter Three

Setsura Aki stepped into the shadow cast by the twenty-foot high wall. He looked up at it. Its height alone was dispiriting. The west entrance of Chuo Park. In the darkness cast by the wall surrounding Shinjuku's no-go, DMZ area, Setsura breathed an uncertain sigh.

Not really all that "uncertain"; but no other word came close to describing his current state of being.

The young man's comely features usually seemed to cheerfully beckon to friends and acquaintances. Now his countenance was clouded by debilitating weakness. The fierceness of the inner demons necessary to withstand its unearthly causes showed on his face, making him look all the more like one of the undead himself.

Chuo Park might seem an entirely appropriate place for the way he appeared. But needless to say, neither his body nor his spirit were happy to be along for the ride. He was here because this was where Kazikli Bey said Takako should be. And where Yakou had disappeared into the woods. Since then, after leaving his first message, a second one hadn't followed, and Setsura could only assume the worst.

He didn't know if the Demon Princess and her crew were still here. He had no choice but to venture forth. He raised his right hand high above his head. An invisible line of light sprang into the sky. The black-clad genie flew through the air like a demonic bird. A twenty-foot hurdle was a mere bump in the road.

Just as he was about to continue on the downward trajectory, from even higher up, a black raven glided down and alighted on his left shoulder. "Ho ho ho," laughed the big raven, covering its beak with its wing. The bright laughter was weirdly charming.

“What do you want?” Setsura asked as he descended. He thought he’d left the raven back at the hospital.

“Hey, don’t be so cold to the living. My die hard old lady told me to go with you. Not to mention that doll girl getting on my case.”

Setsura set down on the long grass.

“She’s got a crush on you. Eyes that can’t cry always on the verge of tears, but staring me down if I balk in the slightest. At the very least, I expect a little gratitude for my generous spirit if you get out of here in one piece.”

“Feel free to fly away whenever you want,” Setsura said breezily as he set off.

“Do you even know where you’re going?”

“No. But it’s not a big place. What I’m looking for should turn up soon enough.”

“It’s eleven o’clock in the morning. You’d better find her by sunset. I don’t care if you’re Shinjuku’s number one P.I. Pawing through the underbrush in Chuo Park at night is a good way to get us both turned into road kill.”

“In that case, you take off and tell that girl how you ditched me.”

The raven pulled a face as only a crow can and changed the subject. “Oh, yeah. I was cruising past the Hyatt on my way here and ran across a couple of guys giving me that look, you know? One of them had the weirdest transparent kind of eyes. Gotta be a clairvoyant. What the hell is he doing in a place like this? Anybody in this city knows that beyond the wall, the average psychic can’t see jack. They must have come in from the outside world. So what’s their gig?”

Setsura just kept on walking and didn’t answer.

A paved path wound between the overgrown lawns and strange, giant trees. Once upon a time, day and night, lovers had strolled hand in hand down these paths. Of course, Setsura couldn’t have known that two days before, Yakou and a pair of his men had taken this same route.

To be honest, he wasn’t sure that the Demon Princess and Kikiou were hanging out here either. Yakou might have made it to the enemy’s kingdom first. He hadn’t returned, so Setsura was operating under the assumption that he was

dead and the Princess had surely moved. For vampires living in the false light of day, having the location of their safe house exposed would be the same as death.

There must be traps everywhere. Yakou's visit certainly would have tipped them off to the assassins sure to follow in his footsteps.

Again deploying his ancient Chinese high-tech skills, Kikiou had undoubtedly wrapped even more fearsome defenses around the already fearsome DMZ. And Setsura was walking right into the middle of the maelstrom.

After ten minutes or so, the raven called out in a surprised voice, "Hey! Aren't you taking things at a rather hasty pace? It's almost like you've been here before."

Setsura didn't answer. The raven wasn't worth the breath.

"Anyway," the bird continued in a curious voice, "you got somebody coming up behind you. I wonder how he got over the wall. If he's a friend, he would have announced his presence right away. Creeping around here not saying a word—you're a man with enemies too."

Setsura stopped. "Hoh, it's about time," the raven muttered.

At that moment, Setsura rose into the air, as if he'd suddenly climbed two steps in a staircase. He floated a foot and a half above the ground and then came to a halt. The work of his devil wires.

"What the hell!"

Beneath the alarmed raven, a snake-like creature slithered through the grass. The dark blue spots spilling across the yellow ochre earth wasn't so much a snake but tentacles. The raven narrowed its eyes but couldn't see what they belonged to.

"We'll keep going like this," Setsura said at length, as if this was still a park and he was simply out for an afternoon stroll.

The raven couldn't tell where the wires made contact with the earth or what connected them to him.

"Think that guy behind us will get caught?"

"I didn't expect an oversized crow to be such a people person," Setsura replied,

allowing a bantering tone to enter his voice.

“Hey!” a voice called out from up ahead.

“Somebody’s here!” The clearly rattled raven flapped his wings.

“Stick your feathers in my ears. The sirens are about to start up.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Of the Greek variety. For a witch’s familiar, you sure are clueless. Shut up and listen.”

“Hey, wait!” cried out a voice to the right.

The raven whirled around but nobody was there.

“Help me, please!” a woman wept.

The bird did a quick one-eighty in the air. “Nobody there either. What is this?”

“Look down.”

“You can’t fool me.”

“That was me talking,” Setsura said to the raven.

“What’s this?” said the raven, a gleam in its eyes.

A pile of white bones piled up in a clearing, ragged pieces of clothing still stuck to them. The majority appeared to be SWAT and SDF uniforms. Their fact-finding missions ended here, death being their ultimate accomplishment.

“They were lured by the voices we heard before.” Setsura pressed his hand against his side as he spoke. “*The sirens of the park*, they’re called. Like the sailors of old, none who came to this vacant land ever left.”

No fences enclosed the area, but the determined investigators would have wandered there in circles until hunger and fatigue overcame them.

“Sound suppressors that scramble the frequencies of the voice have since been developed, but it’s said that after the Devil Quake these sirens have entrapped three thousand souls.”

“So you’re on friendly terms with earplugs, huh? So why wasn’t I affected?”

“Because you’re with me,” Setsura said bluntly and set off again, but with no

indication of where he was headed.

Rather than taking flight, the raven stayed right where it was. Before their eyes an incredible sight opened up within the woods. The horizon stretched out beyond it. The brilliant contours of a building wrapped in a gleaming light that made it waver to and fro like a mirage.

The building itself was a city. But of some inexplicable and fantastic nature, unimaginable in Shinjuku where the aftershocks of the Devil Quake continued on an almost daily basis. More of the sort found in the megalopolises of the outside world like Los Angeles, where cutting-edge construction materials, high-strength engineering and spatial design were all the rage, and the results were entirely removed from the real world.

Here and there, dotting the soaring tangle of crisscrossing tubes, were embedded spherical "houses," like beads on interlaced necklaces. A globe perpetually balanced on the rectangular edges of the walls. Setsura was struck by the realization that this must be the chief residence.

At least the glittering, golden architecture far off in the distance possessed an air of comforting familiarity that came from comporting to the physical laws of the known universe.

These structures instead were a mix and match of all shapes and sizes—spheres, cones, pyramids—arranged and transformed according to hyperdimensional physics, like something out of the *Twilight Zone*.

"What the *hell* is that?" exclaimed the raven, shaking its head like a few screws had come loose inside its little skull. "Looks like something the clam dreamed."

"The clam?" Setsura casually inquired.

"From when the world was born, a giant clam has slumbered at the bottom of the sea. Now and then it dreams a dream. The power of the Devil Quake linked that primordial ocean and Shinjuku together. At least that's how the story goes. Nobody knows for sure. But it doesn't look like a nightmare to me."

"And if it was a nightmare, what then?" Setsura didn't wait for an answer. He started walking again.

A gunshot rang out. Setsura's left cheek quivered. A drop of blood welled

from a razor-thin sliver of exposed flesh, broke the surface tension, and slid down the skin.

“Don’t move.” The command came from above. Not from human vocal cords, but from a loudspeaker. “Lift a pinky and the next one’s right between the shoulder blades.”

The man and the bird froze in place.

“You can’t see me, but I can see you plain as day. From way up here.”

The assassin who’d trailed Setsura to this point roared with laughter.

Part Five: The Mollusk's Nightmare

Chapter One

"And who might you be?" Setsura asked the owner of the unseen voice, with no hint in his manner that he might well be the target of an impending attack. Like the refined young scion on a leisurely stroll about town.

"Hoh. Aren't we all calm and collected." The man was impressed. "Well, I don't suppose you would be prowling about Chuo Park by yourself otherwise. But you'll have to call off the explorations for the time being. We've got some questions about the babe and her four-thousand-year-old boat."

He took a breath. "You got it, bud. I'm a telepath. At the top of my game. Not just what's in your head, but I'm onto what's running around down in your subconscious too. As for why I'm interested in vamps, no comment. You'll just have to wait for the results of our cross-examination. Hey, hey, that's an interesting weapon you've got there. Move a hand and that's all she wrote."

"So now what?" Setsura asked, purging his mind of all thoughts. Like the man said, he had to control his subconscious as well. That wasn't easy.

"Oh, don't bother. It's called the subconscious because it can't be controlled consciously. Turn your head into a blank slate and it's still churning away. Yeah, rooting out where I am right now is totally where you need to begin. But it's not like I'm leaving a trail of breadcrumbs behind. C'mon, about face and back the way you came. Move it."

Setsura turned around. He was in midair. He moved naturally, as if walking along an unseen path beneath his feet. How he was doing this was not immediately apparent to the Telepath. But as long as Setsura was within the Telepath's detection field, he would know what Setsura was up to as soon as Setsura did, and would have countermeasures ready. As with the stalker and the stalked, *being seen* put him at a far greater disadvantage.

“Look at you with the blank mind. And all that white noise in the subconscious. You’ve got some decent training under your belt. I wouldn’t have believed a mere amateur could hide so many cards up his sleeve.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Setsura said with a straight face.

The voice broke into loud laughter. “Oh, please. If a little lip was all it took to make me to pop a rivet, there wouldn’t be enough plots in all the graveyards in the world. I’m a buggering asshole, you say? Well, to start off the torture training, everybody gets it up the ass. So we’re all in that literal hole together. Needless to say, there were never guys like you around. If you’d showed up, it would have thrown us all in a tizzy.”

“Good grief,” Setsura said with a shrug of his shoulders. It wasn’t clear whether this was because he was at his wit’s end, or was dumbfounded by the gruesome nature of his shadowless foe’s training.

He continued for several more yards in the air.

“You actually erase your subconscious, and that’s all she wrote, bud.” The sound of his voice was sharp enough to taste. “I’ll shoot you dead before that happens. With this gun, I could put a hole through a quarter at four thousand yards. Besides, what would a human being be without his subconscious? You don’t know either. Can you even get back to normal?”

Setsura didn’t answer. His interrogator was about to speak again when the black silhouette perched on his handsome shoulder soared into the air. The report of a gun followed immediately upon the sound of flapping wings.

The sound alone identified it as a small caliber rifle. A puff of feathers, and the rest of the bird was blown backwards. A second later came a brutal scream. A fountain of blood erupted in the air. Something fell to earth with a dull thud. A left arm clothed in green army fatigues. Then a downpour of blood that shook the blue-green grass.

The headwaters of the crimson waterfall between heaven and earth was a human figure floating thirty yards above Setsura’s head.

The face twisted in agony as it continued on its downward course. More than counterattacking, more than the state of his wounds, when his own well-being

was made part of the equation a Special Forces soldier prioritized survival expressly in order to accomplish the mission.

Constantly adjusting the repulsive magnetic field, the wide metal belt around his waist set him down gently behind a big tree. The “levitation belt” he was wearing was one of the SDF’s proudest achievements in military hardware.

He reached with his right hand to the first-aid kit hooked to the belt while searching Setsura’s consciousness.

Nothing. A totally unexpected response.

Still, by concentrating his mind, he was able to staunch the flow of blood. The spray-on synthetic skin combined analgesic, anti-inflammatory and tissue regenerating compounds, but couldn’t reattach a severed limb.

The smooth edge of the wound made the Telepath gulp. His fatigues were woven with carbon fibers and ballistic materials that would stop a .45 Magnum. A heavyweight wrestler could swing a Japanese katana with all his might and not leave a nick.

He never would have expected that the titanium threads he read in the young man’s mind could do something like this.

And that crow had been talking like a person. That meant he should have been able to read its mind. Letting it be was a mistake. There were three telepaths or clairvoyants in the whole world who could read non-human flora or fauna. The way it’d suddenly taken off, it must have known its thoughts were unreadable by him.

Of course, having tipped his hand to the youngster, he’d let down his guard for an instant and been caught flat-footed. He’d screwed that pooch but good. No matter how badly he’d wanted to off the kid, as long as the plan was to bring him back and make him talk, his instincts slowed his finger on the trigger. Besides, if anything funny started to crop up, he was sure he’d be the first to know.

Instead he’d been played within an inch of his life. The kid was plugged right into his own subconscious. A combination that was hard to beat.

The Telepath wiped the sweat from his brow and regripped his ACR, his adaptive combat rifle. Based on what he was reading, opposing him was not a

single strand of wire but a spider's web hovering in the sky, ready to vivisect anything that touched it. He didn't understand how he could do something like that without even thinking about it, but Setsura in his current state was beyond a telepath's comprehension.

It'd been twenty minutes since entering the park. After ten minutes more, his partners on the outside would send in somebody after him. His watch-sized combat indicator was still strapped to his left wrist. His best recourse was to stay put. Given what he was up against, he didn't know how else to proceed.

Too bad he was only a passive telepath. Active telepaths could transmit as well. He had to shake his head at his cruel fate. And if he could read other living things, he could detect the bastard's position from how everything around him reacted to his presence.

The Telepath sensed something above him. He reflexively looked up. A foot and a half above his head, the trunk of the tree began to slide apart.

"God damn!" he exploded in English, his mother tongue.

He scrambled to the side just as the weight of the giant chunk of severed wood was about to crush him. An instant later, his body split in half from his right side to his left hip. Fresh blood splashed onto the grass.

The upper half of his body thumped onto the ground. The diagonal remains of the lower half continued to move under the power of the levitation belt. A second later, it too was drawn and quartered, falling down behind its missing half.

Such was the cleanness of the cut that the Telepath's head still registered surprise at what had happened. As the pallor of death colored its features, a dark silhouette emerged from the shadow of the grove of trees ahead of him and walked toward him.

Setsura paused above the man's head and looked down at the corpse. The breathtaking beauty of his utterly expressionless face remained unchanged. The impression of a soulless doll was more likely the result of his currently nonexistent subconscious.

The black art of casting forth his devil wire required not a scintilla of conscious thought. It could be described as a purely autonomic reaction. The

body of this young man could strike down his enemies independent of his volitional will.

Ah, but what a beautiful genie this Setsura Aki was.

The Telepath's head rose up. This time, if someone had been monitoring the man's pulse, he would have flatlined a long time ago and gone gray.

"Not bad, bud." The voice of the dead sounded like it was rising from out of the ground.

Setsura stopped in his tracks. His eardrums must have registered the sound vibrations and transmitted the impulses through the nerves to his brain. Or rather, the signals had taken a shortcut on the way there and on the way back.

"This is the end of you, too. That brain of yours remains a mystery. But my colleagues will soon arrive. Even if you kill them as well, after them will come those whose power puts them in a completely different league from ourselves. You can't escape. You might as well start digging your own grave."

The right arm barely attached to the shoulder jerked up. The black muzzle of the ACR reached out along the line of the forearm.

Just as the wrist severed cleanly from the arm, with a flapping of black wings, the raven landed on the rifle. With the hand still attached, the rifle soared away into the sky. The Telepath glared at the big bird, clucked his tongue, and drew his last.

"Alas and alack," the immortal crow sang down at the corpse, "I've got a body made of ectoplasm. Anything that'd kill a human won't kill me." It cast off the rifle and winged its way back to Setsura's shoulder.

In that instant, its body split apart, from the head down to its tail feathers.

Setsura's intentionless body interpreted this state of non-being as the product of mortal combat, and accordingly struck out indiscriminately at anything approaching or even moving or exhibiting signs of intentional life.

A nightmarish state of non-mind.

Setsura silently walked away, without any conscious recognition of the Telepath or the big raven. Where to? Beyond the forest, in the direction he had

originally been headed.

By the end of that deathly duel, his quiescent purpose—to rescue Takako and Yakou—might as well have been etched into the marrow of his bones. But having turned into a destroying angel, such actions had become all the more difficult. The demonic monsters of this park lay in his path. What ghastly spectacle would result from such a dreadful course of exploration, even if nothing more than the product of him wandering about?

Setsura's figure was swallowed up by the poisonous greenery. Two black lumps on the ground tottered toward each other. Laying the severed ends against each other, they came together to form a single large raven.

"Son of a bitch!"

No sooner had the words left its beak than the two halves began to slide apart. Even if it was a flash of unthinking instinct that would not kill it, what Setsura's devil wire had wrought wasn't allowing this Humpty Dumpty of a crow to put itself back together again.

"This sucks rocks, man. Even if I get my right and left halves to cooperate, I'm going nowhere fast. What the hell am I supposed to do? Run for help? Stick around and watch that beautiful fiend's back? If he lassos everything that moves with his devil wire, in his current state he's going to put the whole park and Shinjuku through a Veg-O-Matic. Decisions, decisions."

With great care, the bird went to fold back its wings. The severed sections popped open again.

"Shit!" the raven screamed.

Chapter Two

Contrary to the Telepath's expectations, his comrades in arms didn't visit the scene of the slaughter for another hour. Rather than launching a rescue mission on their own, the Clairvoyant waiting beyond the wall chose to call in his colleagues first.

None of the three that rushed there thought him a coward for doing so. Telepaths and clairvoyants were rare and valuable resources. He was wholly justified in waiting for reinforcements more qualified than he in search and rescue operations.

Based on the Telepath's reading of Setsura's consciousness and the images and memories he'd received, the Clairvoyant got these members of SDF Special Forces Operational Detachment F plenty fired up.

The boss of the vampires is in the park. Aboard the ship are four Chinese and one Caucasian. One has been reduced to ashes, and one is at large in the city. In any case, they must capture the kid and wring the truth out of him.

That was the memory the Clairvoyant communicated to them. Their knowledge in regard to the legendary vampires had been drilled into them during hypnopedia sessions. They'd learned enough about them from the carnage wreaked in the city as well.

They'd kicked ass and taken names. Based on the results to date, these vampires weren't that big of a deal. But their battles so far had taken place during the day. Without the protecting rays of the sun above, dispatching those creatures of the night wouldn't be so easy. However high their confidence in their training or their skills, their pride as professionals wouldn't allow them to take their enemies for granted.

The guy who knew everything there was to know about the vampire boss was

somewhere in the park and headed for their home ground.

Any qualms about the fearsome DMZ vanished from their thoughts. They went into full-fighting mode and soared over the wall.

The Clairvoyant remained outside the wall. The proper decision. Though the more hot-blooded Telepath had gone off to capture Setsura on his own, the two of them had been tasked from the start to track down the vampires and their progeny. Normally their kind worked out of the Supernatural Research Center and were selected after voluntarily going through the harsh gauntlet of basic training along with the combat soldiers.

In any case, they couldn't afford to lose another one of the valuable "God's Eyes."

"Helluva kill zone," muttered one of the soldiers, observing the carnage covering the green grass.

The lawn spreading out ten yards below them was littered with bloody wildflowers and the bits and pieces of the Telepath's remains. They were, of course, using their levitation belts. The Caucasian with the medium build was called Kendall, but that wasn't his real name.

He stated, "Telepaths can read minds. This guy in particular—" And waited for a reaction. But it wouldn't be forthcoming. He turned to the Asian man hovering next to him. "Killing a man who can even read your subconscious—how exactly would you pull that off, Chan?"

His partner had his eyes closed as if in sleep. Finally he said, "I don't know. But I'd be more interested in the man than the method. There aren't many in this city who could pull off something like that. The director of that hospital where the government office buildings used to be. The old woman who lives in Takada no Baba. And the owner of a *senbei* shop in West Shinjuku, Setsura Aki."

Kendall gulped and swallowed hard. He was not unfamiliar with the name. It was part and parcel of Demon City lore, and had come up countless times in the intel.

The owner of a *senbei* shop, an inscrutable man whose real nature was all but impossible to pin down. The manhunter able to cut apart any enemy. The thought

of facing him sent a chill down the spine of even the most battle-hardened veteran, who'd already seen a good chunk of hell with his own eyes.

But those fears weren't what had Kendall on edge. No, he was chomping at the bit and ready to rumble. "Stands to reason," he said. "Setsura Aki's weapon of choice is a strand of titanium wire. A good thing we're maintaining this distance off the ground. We're talking about a kid dressed in black, handsome enough to die for. The description from the Clairvoyant was precise."

The Asian man nodded. "Unfortunately, we won't be going down to check out the body. There's no guarantee the Telepath didn't let slip something about us, and I wouldn't put it past Setsura Aki to have a surprise waiting for us down there."

"I don't doubt it for a second," said Kendall, staring off toward the west.

A third colleague flew toward them, looking from a distance like a big fly. The Arabian named Meguid.

"What's up?"

The big Middle Eastern man shook his head. He had full lips and short, black curly hair. "Hard to tell at this altitude. The canopy of the trees hides the ground. Maybe it's all the supernatural shit going on here, but the ground radar won't work either."

"So do we wait up here or go down there? Or smoke him out? I think option three would get the fastest results."

"With you on that," agreed Meguid.

They looked at Chan. He'd had little to say so far, but his seemed to be the deciding vote. The soft voice hummed against their eardrums. "Even if we smoke him out, there's no guarantee that he'll be the only one we'll have on our hands. What do we do if we end up with something a lot more dangerous? Besides, if we can't track him in the first place, we'd have to burn down the whole park in the process. Are we prepared to inflict that kind of damage here in the DMZ?"

"Then what?" Meguid's eyes were practically shooting sparks. Once a course of action had been articulated, it was not in his nature to sit around twirling his

thumbs.

"I'll go down and start searching. You two wait here on standby. As soon as I draw a bead on him, all three of us will go in together."

The Caucasian and the Arab looked at each other. Meguid wiped the sweat from his brow and said, "Hold on. You're not taking a risk like that all by yourself. I'm going too."

"Based on how the Telepath died and the material he relayed to us, Setsura Aki is not a man to be trifled with. Taking into consideration the worst possible scenarios, we should do everything possible to limit the collateral damage. You wait here for my word. If I haven't returned after thirty minutes, head back."

"If you insist," Kendall said. "As an old proverb from my country goes, you never get to where you're going when you're in too much of a hurry. It's up to you. In any case, it's your idea, so it's only right that you should take point."

Meguid gave him a long, hard look. Chan didn't react in the slightest. Chan said, "Well, good luck, you two."

"May Allah be with you," Meguid said under his breath.

Kendall simply raised his hand. And Chan disappeared.

His "disappearance" was only an illusion created of his rapid descent, the trademark move of a man like him.

In the air above him, two opponents willing to scorch the park clean. Behind him, an Asian pursuer possessed of unknown powers. Setsura Aki, devoid of human consciousness and proceeding toward an unknown destination.

Chan alit in the canopy of the big tree not far from the Telepath's body. He closed his eyes as he landed and concentrated his thoughts on one particular person.

The man in combat fatigues standing outside the high wall surrounding the park suddenly opened his eyes wide. Words formed inside his head. Not so much words, though, but rather flashes of thought that appeared in his mind: *This is Chan. Don't reply. It wouldn't reach me anyway. I am an active telepath. Communication devices don't work in the forest. Telepathy apparently does. The*

Telepath is dead. We are told never to reveal our abilities. However—I'll spare you the details for now—I need your powers. You can't transmit your thoughts, but I can see what you see. Cast your senses across the forest. If we can link up like this, the Telepath will not have died in vain.

After the mental message was finished—or rather, as soon as Chan severed the connection—he turned his consciousness in the other direction.

There were many types of telepaths. Some drew in signals from all directions, while the senses of others like Chan were directional. Directional telepaths were usually stronger, but Chan's powers were still unfolding and couldn't be compared to a mature practitioner's. In fact, after a mere ten seconds of "communication," his skull felt like it was about to split open.

He was getting nowhere. He was latching onto things right and left, but all of them were consciousnesses other than human. A cold chill radiated from his head down to his groin. Chan went stiff, shifting his mental state before the psychic wound proved fatal. Because the transmission was unidirectional, he could withstand it. But a passive telepath would have been crippled or killed by the shock.

He wiped away the sweat drenching his brow. And yet he focused his attention once more in that same direction.

Without warning, another scene swallowed up his field of vision. It was inside the park. The Clairvoyant's second sight. In another split second, he'd aligned the vision with the maps of the park planted in his brain during the hypnopedia sessions.

The thick undergrowth, faded and rusted benches, terraced plazas, and then the fences and Juniso Avenue—an easy objective to achieve, Chan told himself.

But he wasn't there. Chan turned next toward the library. The scene changed. The poisonous vegetation stirred. *That's it!*

In the next moment, indescribably brilliant and colored ivy flew apart in every direction. The severed ends of the plants, so smooth as to appear like glass, made Chan's heart race all the more.

The haunted greenery suddenly vanished, as if it had decided on its own that it

didn’t belong in the presence of this man dressed in black.

The images streaming from the Clairvoyant ceased. Not because the goal had been accomplished, but because he’d been overwhelmed by the beauty that assaulted his senses.

Setsura Aki was at last in his grasp. *Fix that image in your mind. Don’t look away*.

Chan sent the instructions and again closed his eyes. He concentrated on the comely youth wandering through the forest. The soldier swayed and then righted himself, as if in a trance. He clung to the trunk of the tree. His fatigues were soaked with sweat. Waves of nausea welled up inside him and he trembled and vomited it out.

His consciousness was swallowed up in Setsura’s. Even the pitch black darkness was a veritable paradise in comparison. There was no joy, no anger, no sadness here. It was a void, a nothingness stripped of all emotions.

That a human could transfigure his own mind in such a fashion—could such a being even be captured?

Chan’s thoughts concentrated on this one point. Setsura’s body right now was nothing more than a beautiful bag of bones, a purely autonomic, reactive vessel. Firing from a sufficient distance with a tranquilizer gun or miniature “pencil missile” should bring him down easily.

As Chan worked toward a decision, dull, grey clouds of indecision swirled through his mind. Based on the evidence, he knew better than the rest of them exactly what kind of person this young man called Setsura Aki was. He was something other than human, a terrifying genie.

He had fallen into a non-human state, into a state of nothingness that perhaps no other person had experienced. What would external stimuli do to him? Simultaneously drawn toward him and pushed away, the debate raged hot and cold, dark and light inside Chan’s soul.

He wanted to see it—how the genie called Setsura Aki reacted. But what would happen next?

A fit of coughing made Chan raise his eyes skyward. His two colleagues had

remained where they were in the air. Setsura's image overlapped theirs. There was nothing wrong with his sight.

"Let's give it a shot then," Chan said to himself.

Kendall noticed the look of discomfort on Meguid's face. "What's up?" he asked, rechecking his ACR rifle and scanning their environment with his naked eyes. The 3D ground radar was useless over the grounds covered by the park. No sign of an enemy.

Meguid didn't answer. Finally his expression returned to normal. "I'm going too," he said.

"Where?"

"To look for Setsura Aki."

"Chan said to wait."

"He doesn't actually outrank us, and he didn't actually order us."

"That may be so, but we can't go wandering off on a whim. Remember where we are."

"He's got nobody watching his back. Besides, what happens if he can't contact us? No need for two of us to be waiting here on standby."

"But—"

"No matter what happens, you stay put. You stay alive and get back to the staging area. As soon as the time limit Chan set is up, you leave the park."

The Arabian's words cut to the quick. Kendall didn't have a good retort handy. "Well, I'm not stopping you. Do whatever you need to do. But if you live through this, you and me are going to have words."

"Yeah, I know."

"May Allah be with you."

"Good luck to you too."

Kendall watched with barely concealed contempt as Meguid made adjustments to his levitation belt and flew down to the ground. First the Asian, then the Arab. Sometimes he got the feeling he really could judge a man's character by the

color of his skin.

There was nothing that “off” about Meguid. Maybe he was in a hypnotic state. All the same to him. He was a comrade in arms for the time being. If the SOS came, he’d ride to the rescue. Until then, he’d do as he saw fit.

Meguid descended until he was brushing the treetops. He pulled back the bolt of the ACR, ejecting the bullet, and loaded a tranquilizer round from his belt. It did more than put the subject to sleep. It took over the will, turning the victim into a virtual zombie. Its use was, of course, strictly against the Geneva Conventions.

He proceeded toward the library. A familiar voice barked orders in his head. He had defied it for but a moment. When Kendall had pressed him, his mind was already no longer his own.

He tweaked the magnetic field of his levitation belt and silently glided above the branches. The next instruction had him set down on the branch of a nearby tree. He shouldered his rifle and trained the sights down, the rifle and branch forming an inverted cross.

He’s coming. Shoot on my command. Until then, don’t stir an inch.

Several seconds later, Setsura Aki appeared on the path running beneath the tree where Meguid was hiding.

Normally, sensing the presence of the sniper—even a complete stranger—Setsura would have lashed out with his invisible devil wire. But that intuition was, along with his consciousness, in a suspended state.

The man in black strode into his line of sight and the tranquilizer round went flying—at over 4,400 feet a second. Four times the speed of sound. It grazed the base of Setsura’s neck. He twitched and pitched forward, like a beautiful piece of obsidian art toppling over.

The anesthetics worked almost instantaneously, and yet had no side effects. Most likely created with someone or something in Demon City in mind. Someone like Setsura Aki. Someone with something other than blood flowing in his veins.

Perhaps his one literally saving grace was his beauty, after all. The man in

black sprawled lifelessly on the ground, his arms and pale fingers outstretched, the profile of his face—it was possible to harbor the delusion that the assassin had stalked him just to get a better view.

The vision of a sleeping beauty sleepwalking his way through a waking dream had been so weirdly appropriate to the magical forest surrounding him.

A long moment later, Chan settled soundlessly on the limb next to the unmoving Meguid, who was still aiming the rifle at the fallen target. He was being careful to make sure the tranquilizer was working, and was only beginning to realize he'd already become transfixed by the sight.

"Good job. The problem now is getting him back." Chan said in a low voice, "Get up."

Setsura didn't move in the slightest. A natural reaction, what with his consciousness in a null state. Chan turned to Meguid with cold, grim eyes. "Go down and check it out. Be on your guard."

The Arab vanished from the tree tops and landed on the ground as softly as a cotton ball. He scanned his surroundings and advanced, his ACR rifle leveled.

He had taken three steps when his body separated into horizontal slices just above the waist. Blood spouted out as if from a sprinkler head and he continued forward. His Chinese partner watched dispassionately from the tree tops.

Blood gushed from Meguid's neck. The right hand fell from the wrist. Then his torso split vertically in half, falling in a pile of butchered meat at Setsura's feet.

"Your efforts will not go unnoticed," Chan said in grateful tones. "I'll see to it that you receive a posthumous promotion, for guiding me safely to Setsura Aki."

Chan soared into the sky and settled back down again just in front of Setsura, like a feather coming to rest. Meguid's body quivered slightly as his feet tread upon it.

"I beg your pardon for invading your inner thoughts yet again. I suppose being carried on the back of a stranger would wound such beautiful pride. But I ask you to persevere."

Chan leaned over and flung an arm around Setsura's shoulders. His hand unexpectedly sank into the black fabric without any resistance.

He jerked his arm back. Something of unknown origins had swallowed it down to the wrist. Like the mouth of a fish. The fangs sprouting from its hinged jaws looked like inverted pyramids. Chan's hand from the wrist forward had suddenly disappeared. Beyond the head, Setsura's body and the grass were still clearly visible. Only his hand wasn't there anymore.

What the hell—?

The horrified Chinese soldier jerked uncharacteristically and jumped backwards. Feeling a cold, thin spasm of horror shoot laterally through his neck, he knew this was the precise place where Meguid had lost his head.

Blood poured from his neck. Not red, but blue as the deep blue sea. At some point, Chan's body had filled to the brim with water from the depths of the ocean.

Setsura's back bulged up like the upwelling surface of a black pool of water and split apart. Some species of shellfish jutted out and buried its crustaceous head into Chan's torso.

He cried out from the shock and pain. The sound bubbled from the severed neck in a spout of icy water.

The creature's hard scales pushed halfway into Chan's body and shook his lower half vigorously, tearing him in two. Chan's upper half changed into an enormous clam shell. His lower half remained human.

A sudden thought invaded his brain. In a flash he understood—

This was a dream.

Long ago his parents had told him a fairy tale about a giant clam that rested at the bottom of the world, living in its dreams. Inside that dream, Chan was turning into a clam himself.

Chapter Three

They said that normally the mollusk rested in a deep slumber. But then *this* one wasn't *that* one. The clam asked itself what it was, but it couldn't answer, except that once it had been a small clam buried deeply beneath Shinjuku. And then the Devil Quake came and it started to dream.

Now and then, it was aroused from its slumber. Its true self emerged in those moments and it basked in the tranquility of the depths. Perhaps the reason it abided here in Chuo Park, in the middle of Shinjuku's DMZ, was because of those periods of wakefulness that interrupted its dreams.

It hadn't dreamed much that day. That day it was living the ordinary, fearful life of a clam at the bottom of the sea.

The dreams of two humans interrupted its thoughts. It snared the consciousness of one. Or rather, sucked it in like a breath. More than dreaming a dream, it became that human's consciousness.

That human was a void. Emptiness. Drawn into its living dream, it became one with the living fear of all of creation—nothingness.

The clam screamed. It pleaded and prayed to wake up. And then—

Chan stood up. The sea water ceased pouring from his neck. The shellfish disappeared. The face tore apart. A starry sky appeared. Though born under the sea and spending its days deep within the earth, the clam now dreamed of the heavens. Hard to believe—but the universe lived inside of every living thing.

Chan tottered forward. Silently, his legs were cut off at the knees. The countless stars of the Milky Way spouted forth from the severed limbs. Scattering upon the grass, the stars slid off the green blades like rain and splashed onto the ground.

This was Chan's dream. The dream had literal legs of its own. Chan

transformed from starry sky into a clam. The clam became a human.

Continuing to pray unanswered prayers, it was gripped by fear. What exactly was this mad dream? What did it accomplish? What did dreams do? Nobody knew. And so there was no way to defend against them.

The one man who might have known watched as his body turned into the blue ocean, all the while craving the deep, dreamless sleep that narcotics bring.

About the same time Chan disappeared from the stand of trees, on the opposite side of the grove of trees an odd lump landed on the ground.

It was a crow, more or less. And for the time being, less. It was missing a wing. From the right, it was perfectly fine. From the left, though, it wasn't there at all. It was a big crow, but only half of one. The wound didn't expose tissue, muscle or organs, but the whitish-gray substance of its ectoplasm.

The bird turned its eye toward the place where Chan had disappeared. "Setsura is finally by his lonesome. I was wondering what would happen when they shot him. That Chinese fellow's been swallowed up by the mollusk's dream. I'd better clean up this mess pronto or another bucket's going to hit the fan. If I can get the dumb bloke to snap out of it. Hey! Wakey, wakey!"

The bird thumped Setsura on the back with its wing, splashing black water into the air with each stroke.

"Oh, great," the raven groaned. "You're tripping out with the clam too. Shit. Now what?"

A glint came to its eye. Catching a whiff of danger, it soared into the sky. It was, after all, the familiar of the Czech Republic's greatest witch.

A shining mass sprouted from Setsura's back. The raven cawed. Like a crow. It was too startled for human words.

The thing born out of the deep blue waters welling from Setsura's back were titanium devil wires. Not what Setsura carried on him, but the dream's. This was a dream as well, the dream dreamed by the mollusk in the depths of the earth, the reality of its mad nightmares fully expressing itself.

The threads proliferated and elongated, and crawled along the ground mowing

down the underbrush and felling trees like blades of grass under a weed whacker. Twigs and branches swirled into the air and fell back to earth like hail. Even the drifting microbial life was severed in two.

The wind howled. The forest answered back. The most dangerous place on earth had itself encountered something to be afraid of.

Behold, the devil wire dream expanding infinitely from the sleeping Setsura's back. Reaching out in all directions, severing everything it encountered. What could stand against it?

The twenty foot wall "protecting" Chuo Park? But no wall could hold back a dream.

And beyond the wall was Demon City Shinjuku.

"Criminy! What's gotten into you?" shrieked the raven. "You going to wreck Shinjuku too? Hell, if these threads cross the chasm, Tokyo—Japan—the whole bloody world—is toast. Open your eyes, you dumb bastard!"





The bird's brain was seized by a terrifying image—buildings and people covering the ground like so much split kindling. Threads and more threads advancing like the ghastly columns of a mutant army. Snaking into the chasm that separated Shinjuku from the rest of the world. And days later, crawling out the other side. The silver threads stealing through Tokyo. Not even an ocean could stop these dreams.

For the first time ever, human beings would watch the destruction of their world.

"Wake up, dammit!" the half-raven screamed again.

"What a funny crow." The coarse Japanese came from above its head. "I could make a bundle with you on the talk show circuit. A lot more than capturing that young man."

A human descended from the sky until he was in front of the raven, the ACR rifle at his hip. It was Kendall. "What are you up to, Setsura? Never seen half a crow before. Not alive and well, that is. You escape from your cage?"

The crow cawed.

Kendall responded with a sardonic smile. "Clever. But I already heard you cussing him out. Though if you really are just a dumb bird, I might as well put you out of your misery. Seeing as you're not dead already, I don't imagine a regular round would do any more damage. But I'm loaded with incendiary. Burns at about six thousand degrees. You sure there'll be anything left but ash?"

"Nope," the raven said promptly. Talking like this, its voice was half as loud. "But kill me, and how exactly do you plan on carting Setsura here away?"

"Say what?" Kendall said fiercely. He then asked inquisitively, "How exactly would you pull that off?"

"I'll carry him. Appearances aside, I'm the only one on the planet who can get cut by those devil wires and live to tell the tale. If I take a little care, hug the ground and thread the needle so to speak, I should stay in one piece—well, two pieces—and make this thing work."

"You can carry a person with a body like that?"

“Sure. Watch.”

The big raven opened its beak wide. Because of the coating of ectoplasm over its cross-section of a torso, Kendall couldn’t see down to its gut. Neither could he comprehend the reason Galeen Nuvenberg had sent the bird to accompany Setsura.

With a gagging sound, a white rope-like object flew from the bird’s throat and struck Kendall squarely in the face.

The raven had coughed up a freshly-hewn wooden stake and sent it right through the back of Kendall’s head, killing him on the spot. He stood there, his head flung back. The bird paced in front of him and deliberated.

“This guy’s the—ocean. I don’t know if this will work, but it shouldn’t kill you. This time. Hey, sorry for having to do this the hard way. Just so’s you know.”

The raven fastened its beak around the pin of the grenade hanging from Kendall’s chest and pulled it out. The safety lever flipped away. There were four grenades in total. The explosives hissed ominously as the bird removed them one by one and dropped them around Setsura’s neck and shoulders.

Four splashes and the grenades disappeared. “And now for the *pièce de résistance*—”

With its one foot, the bird aimed the ARC downwards and pulled the trigger with its beak. The ripples from the 6,000-degree incendiary rounds were surprisingly small.

“Well?” it asked, almost as a prayer.

Several seconds later, explosions reverberated from somewhere within Setsura’s body like dull, distant echoes. Two, three and four. But the beautiful mannequin-like figure didn’t move.

“No good, huh,” the raven said in a disappointed voice.

In that instant, Setsura’s body sprang up like a coiled spring. The devil wires streamed outwards, merging into a single, fat, flowing rope.

“It’s alive! It’s alive! The drugs didn’t reach him at the bottom of the sea? Or

dissolved in the water?”

The delighted voice of the raven suddenly ceased. The face of the standing Setsura as was blank as ever. And then, as if from the depths of his soul, a human countenance bubbled to the surface.

The raven called out, “Hey, hey! Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you,” said Setsura in a fatigued voice—or rather, a voice still shaking off a dreamlike stupor. “I hear everything. Time and space present no obstacles to dreams.”

“You still dreaming?”

“So it appears.”

“Then what’s with the devil wires coming out of your back?”

“The way I am right now, there’s not much I can do about it. My consciousness will be gone again any moment now. Alternately coming and going.”

“Meaning what?”

“The mollusk is quite mad.”

You don’t say, the raven didn’t say. Setsura had turned into a dream, sending out bundles of his devil wire, and was standing there chatting like it was no big deal.

“Despite attuning its conscious state to the nothingness of my unconscious, it still couldn’t bear it. Although the shock of this tough love treatment of yours woke me up for the time being, but I’m barely standing here on my own. I am still little more than the mollusk’s dream.”

“Then what’s our next move?”

“We’ve got to wake it up.”

“And how do you propose waking up a clam?” the raven fretted.

“I don’t—” *Know*, Setsura was about to say, when he choked and coughed. His lips parted. A bright object appeared. The raven felt its radiant, dazzling presence. A form that blithely ignored all the physical laws of the universe.

Up was down. Left was right. The acute was the obtuse. Straight lines bent and yet remained straight. Lines disappeared into infinitely close vanishing points. The only things that existed were the points they occupied at that moment.

The thing spilling from Setsura's mouth touched the devil wires and severed into pieces, which were then caught up by the wind and buried themselves into the ground, into the trunks of the trees. The trees transformed, as did the earth, each taking on strange shapes and forms, unfurling the dreamworld before their eyes.

"Oh, great!" the raven shouted. "As if those wires of yours weren't enough! Now there's another thing to deal with. What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

The raven turned to Setsura and glared at him. The beautiful young man turned on his heel and walked off into the underbrush on his far right.

The raven flapped its wing and yelled in a despairing voice, "Is there anybody here with the slightest idea about how to clean up this crap?"

Part Six: The Untouchable Casket

Chapter One

The Clairvoyant saw the whole thing in minute detail.

When Chan was cut to pieces by the devil wire, the telepath's spell broke. But the grotesque scene that followed kept him rooted him to the spot. The raven watched. Setsura was a witness. Chan's final destination was no mystery to him.

After that, the outrageous future that awaited them became clear as day. The necessity of contacting his colleagues about the strange scene unfolding before him temporarily slipped his mind.

When he finally came back to his senses and rushed to his car in order to get the word out, a hoarse voice called out to him.

"You look like you've seen quite the ghost. I wouldn't mind a look myself."

The Clairvoyant whirled around. Seeing the strange trio next to the tall wall, he narrowed his eyes. An old woman in a wheelchair. Next to her, a golden-haired girl. Above their heads, a black bird flapped its—wing. The bird was missing its left-hand side.

But more than the weird bird, the haunting vibe he felt in his bones looking at this small, inconsequential grandma made his blood freeze in his veins. The Clairvoyant swallowed hard.

"I don't know what sort of clairvoyant you are, but seeing into Chuo Park is quite the feat. What organization do you belong to and what are its objectives? And where is Setsura Aki?"

The Clairvoyant ran through a quick list of strategies for dealing with the three, and discarded them. He didn't respond and put his hand on the door handle.

What the—? He suppressed the instinct to scream. The door handle turned into a cobra and flicked its red tongue at him. He let go like it was a red-hot iron.

The snake's eyes glittered and turned back into a door handle.

"That's a good boy," the grandma in the wheelchair said with a bright smile. "I didn't think a little sleight of hand would work on a natural clairvoyant. Went all out on that one."

"You try anything funny, Grandma, and you'll find yourself six feet under. Or are you plenty satisfied already with your three score and ten?" The Clairvoyant raised his ACR to his hip in a threatening manner. "You an ally of Setsura Aki? I have a few questions for you, too. But I'm in a hurry right now. Maybe later."

"Take care, now," the old woman said as the Clairvoyant slid into the driver's seat and started up the engine.

A dull thud and the engine screamed. The car rocked back and forth. The Clairvoyant noticed the world beyond the windshield changing. The wall and the road were lifting up.

By the time he realized that he was sinking into the ground and tried to open the door, the asphalt was level with the bottom of the door. Too frightened to scream, he leapt out head-first and tumbled onto the sidewalk as a crunching sound reached his ears.

The car disappeared into the sudden sinkhole, leaving only the open door behind, torn from the frame. Three seconds later the car was completely swallowed up by the earth. The roof was briefly visible, and then it too vanished.

The surface of the asphalt returned to its normal state, with all the original cracks and stains exactly as they were. A scraping noise. The car door had toppled over onto the pavement.

The Clairvoyant stayed on his knees and brought his rifle to his shoulder and aimed it at the strange trio. "Who the fuck are you guys?"

The old woman said brightly, "Manners, manners. Why don't you introduce yourself first?"

The next moment, a small hole appeared between her eyebrows. The mach four flechette punched through her skull and out the back like a nail gun through tissue paper, and sailed off toward some distant, unknown target.

It was a 1.5x42mm projectile with a carbon steel jacket that flew with the characteristics of a dart. The shot ran flat at 600 meters, yet produced negligible recoil, making it the preeminent round in its class. Under demanding battle conditions, the mechanism compensated for shooter fatigue and firing errors.

The impact knocked the grandma's head against the back of the wheelchair. Not letting her out of his sights, the Clairvoyant pointed the rifle at the girl standing next to her.

But a strange thought made him hesitate. There was something "hard" and "solid" about the pretty young lass.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the grandma smiling. "You just missed the medulla oblongata. Why not give it another shot?"

Before being assigned to Demon City, Operational Detachment F soldiers were drilled to take the simplest, most effective measures first when dealing with the citizens of the city.

The Clairvoyant took an incendiary grenade from his chest, pulled the pin and tossed it at the feet of the trio. A *clunk* and the grenade rolled up to the feet of the girl.

The Clairvoyant jumped backwards. The fire from the incendiary grenade would engulf a good five-yard radius.

An achingly slender white hand reached out and picked up the rough gray lump. The Clairvoyant broke out in a cold sweat.

"Look, Grandmother," she said in a voice like a bell. "The man dropped something."

The wrinkled old face nodded. "Well, you'd better return it."

"Yes."

The afternoon breeze fluttering the hem of her light purple dress, the doll-like girl respectfully held out the murderous weapon with both hands as the soldier scurried backwards.

"Stay where you are!" the retreating Clairvoyant ordered. His knees shook. He was only now beginning to grasp the true nature of his opponents—and that

Demon City was home to every kind of being imaginable.

"What are you running away for?" the girl asked, tilting her head to the side. "Is your heart so small? Like this raven's? You don't mind throwing things at people, but object when they are returned?"

The Clairvoyant pulled the trigger. His frenzied state notwithstanding, his aim was true. Except that no bullet emerged. He heard the *pop* of the primer igniting, but it was like the casing had leaked and the powder was wet. What the girl did next set his hair on end. She stood in front of the rifle and peered curiously down the barrel.

He shrieked, turned and ran. Behind him, the old woman said, "Enough of the hijinks. Time to get down to business."

He felt a weight on his shoulders. "You just can't see where you're going," said a voice like a strumming harp. White fingers laced themselves together beneath his chin. The hands of the girl hovering over his head. The hands turned. Bones broke with a creak and snap.

The Clairvoyant heard the sound. The next thing he knew he was looking at the raven and the old woman. His vision had revolved 180 degrees. Nothing hurt, but his whole body was as stiff as a board.

"Let's go."

His body moved according to the command. But whether that meant moving forwards or backwards—the head of the psychic's body faced the grandma. The rest was pointing the other way. So the rest of him glided in reverse like he was moonwalking.

"What shall we do, Grandmother?" asked the girl. Straddling the man's shoulders, her unladylike stance was a curious contrast with her dainty countenance.

"Look."

The girl's eyes followed the direction of the old woman's dry twig of a finger. "Oh, my," she exclaimed.

Something bright and shining was spilling over the top of the wall. The surface

was like a glimmering feather. The midday sun made it sparkle like inlaid gold. The wave of light dammed up by the wall was breaking through the levee, like a work of abstract art singing praises to freedom.

“That is—?”

“Setsura Aki’s devil wire.”

“But of course.”

“And yet, a dream.”

“So it would seem.”

“Take me there.” The old woman indicated a point along the wall.

“Do you know what you are going to do?”

“Anyone that would deign to ask Galeen Nuvenberg such a question must be in need of adjustments elsewhere as well. Perhaps your big toe is sticking out a bit too far?”

“Please forgive me.” Perched on the man’s shoulders, the girl gracefully bowed her head.

“Onward.”

The order was issued to the Clairvoyant. Like an old servant at the beck and call of his master, he turned the wheelchair around, the golden-haired girl riding on his shoulders, only his head facing forward, the rest of him pointing the other way.

When they arrived at the wall, the wave spilling over the top had reached halfway down the side. And just how would this rare specimen of a witch counter these overflowing threads of death?

The old woman lined up with her right side tight to the wall and drew up her sleeves. Her arms were so skinny as to make a person wince in sympathy. A tangled mat of veins ran across the surface and the skin was blotchy and stained. It really did look as if rebar had been embedded in the flesh to provide support.

Her long black fingernails were tidy and manicured, suggesting materials devised of some unknown chemistry.

And yet this was all that stood against the destruction of the world?



The Czech Republic's most accomplished witch pressed the palm of her hand tightly against the wall and began to chant an incantation deep in her throat.

Barely a second later, a change was born within the devil wires slipping down the wall. The coiling, curling ends stalled and came to a halt six feet above the ground.

Galeen Nuvenberg's spell continued. She raised her left hand.

"Grandmother." The girl's hard face seemed clouded with concern. "Performing such sorcery in your infirmed state—"

A bright drop of sweat appeared on the old woman's forehead. Her incantations were no longer audible, but emerged only as murmurings from her lungs and larynx.

The Clairvoyant saw that her upheld hand was drawing in the silver light. If the devil wires born from the beautiful manhunter's back was part of the big clam's dreams, then what nightmare must this extraordinary witch be seeing?

The wave covering the wall merged together into the form of a writhing python. The end changed into the tip of an auger and rammed through Galeen Nuvenberg's left hand.

The thing disgorging the dream and the thing drawing it in—the battle to the death between them was beginning.

The wind roared. A black cloud grew from a single dot in the heavens like India ink spilled into water, blanking out the sun. Lightning arced across the heavens, lighting up the old witch's face like a majestic marble statue.

Demon City was said to be at the forefront of the study of vampires—those demons that suck the lifeblood out of humans. A large part of the scholarship was thanks to the cooperation of the Toyama clans. However, despite all the data gathered, among the questions that remained unresolved was what went on during the time a vampire slept.

Generally speaking, they slept at "night." But was the time of "night" relative or absolute? Supposing it was absolute, when it came to vampires, the time most necessary to sleep would be from sunup to sundown. In many cases, they feared

the light of day and so preferred the dark.

But shaded from the sunlight, did vampires prowl about in houses sucking the blood of the residents?

Here was where the relative concept of “sleep” arose.

The world’s most complete set of vampire studies—the *Toyama Vampire White Papers*—today constitute the Vampire Archives at the National Museum of Romania. According to this research, as high as 99 percent of all vampires retired at dawn and woke at sunset.

However, because of the many individual methods for sensing light, this could be many hours after sunrise, or several hours before the last rays had vanished.

Vampires could operate fully in twilight, and did not appear to possess a strict circadian rhythm or an internal clock that operated according to the presence or absence of daylight.

For all vampires everywhere, the bottom line was whatever it took to stay alive. And if that meant the middle of the night, then so be it. The prosaic truth was that vampires were creatures of the night because they couldn’t operate fully in the light of day.

Though seeing that they were loath to appear even on overcast days, the sleep of the vampire was in any case very deep. The heartbeat fell to once in ten minutes. The breath wouldn’t fog a mirror held in front of the mouth. Drop red meat into a casket and most would doze right through it.

For the vampire, this was a time of fatal vulnerability, when an interloper with malicious intent could bring their existence to a sudden close without them noticing until it was too late.

As a consequence, as the legends of these creatures of the night spread across the globe, a plethora of countermeasures were spawned in response.

Rudimentary measures such as having hungry wolves and poisonous snakes and spiders guarding a casket were already known across Eastern Europe. A tendency for poison-spouting mannequins and trip line-triggered crossbows was common in parts of Western Europe and China.

More recently, the materials out of which caskets—and the structures housing them—were made were proceeding apace with the technology of the times. But there was no such thing as a perfect defense.

As a case in point, in the Toyama housing project—in response to an invader or of their own free will—only the Elder and his grandson Yakou could wake themselves up, no matter how deep the sleep.

And there was one other as well.

Chapter Two

Chan's appearance at the library was entirely by chance.

Transformed by the madness of the mollusk, his body continued in its strange mutations. The amalgam of angles and curves—of squarish and spherical projections—clothed in military fatigues emerged from the swirling nebulae of shooting stars that surrounded him.

Perhaps because of enemies he'd encountered on his way to the library, a tortured cry issued forth from one face of the polygon, from what seemed to be the bizarrely colored inside of his mouth.

The dream that had become Chan—the Chan that had become the dream—paused at the first floor main entrance of the library to scan its surroundings. Inside the hall was drenched in green. Thick carpets of moss piled high on the floor and covered the walls, making it into a completely different world.

Odd odors drifted in the air—but undoubtedly fresh. The oxygen generated by the moss was fermented from the sun and the haunted air of Shinjuku.

A naked woman was lying in the center of the hall. Takako Kanan.

The night before last, Yakou and Princess had battled each other in the middle of the air. The conclusion of that conflict saw Takako cast down to the earth.

The mystery was how she had survived. Her pale skin was covered with abrasions and bruises, gaping wounds as if inflicted by the edge of a sword. Her bountiful breasts and lower torso were similarly covered with blood.

Despite his murderous state of mind, the thing that was once Chan was overcome by curiosity.

One of the shooting stars whirling around him broke orbit and flew in between her legs. The naked body quivered in an erotic and enticing manner. And yet it

aroused no obvious emotional reaction in the current Chan.

The tangle of spheres and wheels of varying sizes that constituted his legs nevertheless dragged him closer, likely a product of the dreaming clam's instinctual response.

Takako's body changed into a starry sky. She became the dream as well. Perhaps this was the way the mad mollusk communicated. The human cosmos dimmed. A dark cloud obstructed the sunlight streaming through the window.

A creaking sound rang out next to the woman's body. Not the result of Chan's movements—it was the sound of a hinge. The lid of the luxurious casket next to her was opening. The person inside was arrayed in dazzling dress in no way inferior to the casket's exterior decor.

The Carpathian stood up. He had a graceful face with fierce eyes like inlaid gems. Those eyes examined the strange interloper. "What are you?" he demanded, in a voice like the roar of a lion. Even the moss seemed to tremble in fear.

The thing that was Chan reluctantly turned his attention to the speaker. There was no telling what bodily organ he used, but he "saw" him. And then shifted his attention back to Takako.

"All means of access to this casket are strung with threads I borrowed from a certain man. The threads will cut through any thing regardless of its shape, living or dead. What are you, a phantasm?"

Chan ignored him—the vampire that feared no one but Princess. General Bey hadn't figured out why yet. He growled very much like a wild animal and leapt from the casket.

He grabbed the "neck" protruding from the collar of Chan's military fatigues. His hand closed effortlessly into a fist. "Oh," he groaned. "A dream. I don't know whose dream, but I doubt it is a person with good pedigree. And drawing this girl into it—insolence piles upon insolence. A dream it may be, but you are still responsible."

Ruby red light spilled from the general's eyes. But no matter how powerful this prince of death was, he couldn't turn his own self into a dream on a whim.

He didn't counterattack. He reached with his right hand into the tunic of his jacket. "When nightmares become a battlefield, a magician who once entertained at Matthias Castle in Budapest taught me this trick. Even I can't fight a dream. But I can wake you from yours."

He turned to the invader leaning over Takako's body and thrust out his fist while opening his hand. The thick palm contained a gleaming golden flute. It was no more than four inches long. He brought it to his mouth and blew with great strength.

The thing that was once Chan—still wearing military fatigues—pressed its hand-like objects into Takako's chest. The stars rising out of her body sprung white tails and sank into the floor. The cosmos began to move.

This change was perhaps a reflection of the clam's deranged world. The clam was at its wit's end, and faced with the general standing there holding the flute, the universes of the soldier and the woman turned as if to flee.

That action came to a halt as they were passing through the door. The thing that was once Chan in a flash regained its original shape. As did Takako.

A dazzling gust of wind tore the two apart. Chan's head and torso and legs tumbled to the concrete floor like slabs of butcher's meat. Again assuming human form, his body met the mortal fate awaiting it.

A horrific howl came from the direction of the door. The gust of wind that had thrust back Takako had restored General Bey to his true form. He was the one who had cried out. And for good reason. His face and chest and legs were crisscrossed with dozens of fine red lines.

The protective mesh he'd woven from Setsura's devil wires cut him as he was thrown out the door. The general roared. The cry of the wounded magical beast echoed back from the forest like thunder.

"Setsura Aki!" General Bey gathered his ragged breath. Minutes later he muttered, "How much longer must I suffer the spells of that beautiful genie?"

He got to his feet. Standing there like a cracked statue, he looked down at the naked, white body of the sleeping Takako.

"She wandered home, this very pretty prey. Losing it so easily would render

my long-awaited release from Princess's prison for naught. Every night from this night forth, I shall fill my plate. The plate that is my appetite."

A ferocious self-satisfied smile creased his lips. The general pounced to the left. With a sound like a broken violin string, the devil wire sliced through the air and sailed back at least ten yards to the copse of trees behind him.

And disappeared into the hand of the stunning man in black. "Well done," said the smiling Setsura Aki.

Having just emerged from the mollusk's dream, his attractive face was deeply shadowed with fatigue. Though that also cloaked the otherwise affable *senbei* shop owner with an indescribable sense of dread.

"A surprise attack." The general looked at Setsura with glowing eyes and grinned.

Setsura shrugged. He walked up to the general, stopping when about ten feet separated them. "My bad. I just made the return trip from the most unusual world of dreams. And on top of that, the effects of the tranquilizer gun did not entirely disappear along with the dream. Did you wake the clam up with that flute?"

"Indeed. And you followed its silent sound to this place?"

"I did," Setsura said with a clever smile that shook the general's murderous mood. "The normal me wouldn't have heard it, but the dreamworld me did. Say, this park is awfully quiet for the middle of the day. At least the bothersome bunch I ran into before still remembers me. We all seem to have arrived here in one piece. And here's the person I was looking for all along."

The general followed Setsura's gaze. He said in an icy voice, "Is she your paramour? She tumbled into my bed last night. She was cast out of the sky by that fearsome Princess. From the condition of her wounds, she must have been lucky enough to land in soft and muddy earth. She wandered for the next day in a senseless daze. But she has a strong hold on life, and the stars are in her favor."

"Yeah, she is a tough one," Setsura said with a wry grin. He stared fixedly at General Bey. From his perspective, it was as if Takako had fled from the jaws of a ravenous wolf only to fall into the den of an equally ravenous lion.

"Ah, no need to fear. I am yet to quench my thirst. I shall indulge myself

starting tonight. Would you like to join in?"

"Once my demands have been met," Setsura said with indifferent nonchalance, "I'll think it over."

General Bey unexpectedly smiled and laughed heartily, in a manner appropriate to his reputation. When Ryuuki laughed along with his soldiers, it was the commander's smile of pain and sorrow. But General Bey fought for the sheer joy of fighting, and did not give any soldier's death a second thought. He mourned for no one but only drank to victory while planning the next new glorious campaign that would send thousands, tens of thousands, to a dusty death.

Ryuuki's soldiers loved him and fought for him, marched to the front and lost their lives for him, celebrating that victory and peace from the bottom of their hearts.

The soldiers who served General Bey hated him with a passion, and marched to war begrudging their fate, and prayed for *his* death while celebrating the victories he brought them.

That was the kind of man a general like Ryuuki was, and the kind of man a general like Kazikli Bey was.

"And what would those demands be?"

"To start off with, safely return Kanan-san." Setsura held up a finger. "Second, tell me where Princess and her crew are holding out." A second finger. "Third, bury yourself back beneath the earth where you came from, and never show your face again." A third finger. "Yeah, that should suffice."

"Easy demands to make." Red light again flashed from his eyes. "Because you shan't accomplish a one of them. If you really want her, then become one of us."

Before the last word left his mouth, General Bey waved his right hand. The devil wire strung across the doorway sprung silently at Setsura's head with a force and trajectory that would cleave it in two. In that same instant, it was intercepted by one of the same, and reflected in midair.

"A stalemate," Setsura said in a bored voice. "You really have to come up with some new ideas."

“How about this?”

The general’s eyes locked on Setsura’s. The black-clad figure stiffened. Call it instant hypnotism or the dark magic of his evil eyes, but in that moment Setsura lost the ability to move.

His lips being the lone exception, and only barely at that. “Why—?”

“You mean, why didn’t I use this power on the roof of the hotel? I appear to have underestimated you. I imagined I could easily dispatch you before resorting to such measures. And when the moment came, you had already fallen from the building.”

“Well—thanks—and with Ryuuki—?”

“Give me some credit. Only a fool shows his cards before playing the last hand. You and Doctor Mephisto were there too. Just passing either one of you on the street puts a strain on my soul. Oh, do not waste the effort. Your body cannot move. I am impressed that you can even speak. I cannot claim four thousand years of heritage like Princess. But you shall receive a baptism in the blood of a man who has lived half a millennium.”

The might of his unparalleled self-confidence glowing in his eyes, the general sauntered up to Setsura and tore open the front of his shirt. The gleaming crimson demon glow was suffused with craving as well.

He paid no attention to the throat of the prey, but focused instead on the snowy, handsome face. Ah, the light in his eyes—was it not the same as when Setsura had battled Mephisto before daybreak?

“That doctor interfered with you and Ryuuki covered for him. Now I begin to grasp the reasons why. You will all come to serve me, the girl too.”

A white throat that could hardly belong to a man, but that could only belong to him—the general’s fangs sprang out from his lips towards that throat.

A bright, silver light shot out like a jet of scalding steam. It came from a crucifix. The powerful vampire retreated, covering his eyes with his hand.

“You bastard—”

“Since learning of the name Kazikli Bey, I figured I should come prepared.

Just a trifle of a thing that was lying around the house where I got my wounds treated." He plucked at the cross hanging against the hollow of his throat at the end of the silver chain and held it up with his left hand. "You're no Christian. Why do you fear a crucifix? Because it is such a foundational spiritual symbol?"

"Enough of your lip."

"No, I've got more." Setsura stepped forward. The general retreated into the courtyard in front of the library, and then silently advanced again. He pressed his right hand against the back of his left. Something like gray ash spilled from between his fingers.

"The clouds are breaking up," Setsura observed. A column of sunlight broke through the clouds and illuminated the lawn. "Looks like it's going to be a bright, sunshiny day. Pretty soon the world will be bathed in light. Answer me if you want to get back to the shade. Where are your friends?"

As if dodging the crucifix held out in front of him, General Bey ducked beneath the eaves of the building. It was hard to imagine such a vampire lord being cornered by a mere cross.

"Get back," he ordered, in a voice laced with unimaginable hatred.

"Where are they? Or would you rather turn into ash first?"

Holding the crucifix with his left hand, Setsura got ready a strand of devil wire with his right.

A bubble rose from his body into the sky. Before the surprise could register, General Bey was running for the door.

Tentacles covered with suckers sprang from Setsura's chest and reached toward the general. As soon as they touched his back, they changed into clumps of flesh and fell to the earth.

"Still—a dream," said Setsura, his voice sounding like he was underwater, and layered over by the echo of a wooden lid striking a wooden jamb.

Chapter Three

Luckily for Setsura, this time he had a firm grasp of his own mind. While transforming to something at the bottom of the sea, he surveyed his surroundings. A golden gleam played hide and seek on the wildly overgrown lawn. Lying in the grass was the flute General Bey had dropped from his scalded hand.

This alone had the power to awake the mad mollusk from its sleep.

However, by changing back into a dream, Setsura had also lost physical contact with the real world.

At that moment, a cheerful voice called out, “Leave that to me.”

Together with the vigorous flapping of wings, a vision of glittering golden hair alit on the ground before Setsura’s eyes—the small, cherubic face, the deep blue eyes, the purple satin dress.

“I’ll take things from here,” said the big raven. Thanks to Galeen Nuvenberg’s first aid, it had miraculously been restored to a whole bird. One half had watched over the witch outside the fence while the other half tailed the walking dream that was Setsura. Several minutes before, when he’d come back to life, the bird had merged together into its original form outside the fence.

Even when it’d been split in two, half of it had gone looking for Galeen Nuvenberg for help, captured the clairvoyant, kept Setsura’s devil wire dream from invading the city, and then restored Setsura’s consciousness. By anybody’s calculation, that was no mean feat.

Arriving at exactly the right time could be credited in part to his other half knowing that Setsura was on his way to the library. But the real reason was that Nuvenberg had witnessed the full particulars from outside the fence. Because by then she had the Clairvoyant at her beck and call.

Gold gleamed in the doll girl's mouth and the soundless sound cried out. Ten seconds later—Setsura sank to the grass on one knee.

"Are you all right?" the big raven asked, though in Nuvenberg's voice. "We have been watching you all along. So don't worry."

"How was the hospital?" Setsura said half in jest. "They sure bitch about checking yourself out of that place. That director in particular."

"Oh, he should behave himself until sundown." The raven switched back to his mistress's curt female diction. "Until then, we have some straightening up to do. Starting with burning that man's casket—Kazikli Bey."

"We can't do that," said Setsura, starting toward the library door.

"Why is that?" the doll girl asked.

There she was with her deep ocean blue eyes and graceful lips brushed with red. This was the girl who'd perched astride the Clairvoyant's shoulders like the Colossus and snapped his neck, just like that. The citizens of Demon City were hardly strangers to these precincts either.

"The bastard took Kanan-san with him into his casket." His eyes reflected only the severed body of Chan sprawled on the floor.

"How do you intend to proceed?" queried the raven as they passed through the entranceway.

"Don't know," Setsura said shortly. "But would you happen to know who this Chinese chap is?"

"Yeah, our friend here fessed up. He's attached to SDF Special Forces Operational Detachment F. The foreign legion contingent. Their objective—"

A ray of sunlight slashed through the skylight. Three shadows—one human, one not so human, one bird—crawled faintly across the floor.

Setsura said as calmly as ever, "You know things are getting messed up when outsiders start interfering in our business."

"If we don't settle our business with those four, we can probably expect the nuclear option to be exercised eventually. Thankfully, we got us here a seer. He should be able to tell us whether they're still in the park. As for you—"

“I know.” Setsura nodded. “But as you have just seen, I’m still locked in this dream. And the mollusk is as mad as ever.”

“There is that.”

“The guy on the floor was in the dream with me. And yet he’s not coming back. Only I turned into the ocean. What do you think that means?”

“Probably that yours is the stronger will. No question after seeing your devil wire dream. For the same kind of reasons a man will visit his lover over and over in his dreams.”

The sound of muffled laughter made Setsura look down. The doll girl had her hand pressed against her mouth. Feeling Setsura’s eyes upon her, she put on a serious expression.

“Excuse me,” she said with a nod of her head.

“No problem,” Setsura said awkwardly. His right hand flashed. He was aware of the vampire’s defensive measures. The devil wire sensed nothing afoot.

The motley crew surrounded the resplendent box of death. The lustrous black surface did not contain a single carving or inscription, but was inlaid with jewels the size of a man’s thumb. Ruby red. Sapphire blue. Emerald green. Transparent diamond. A child with zero artistic appreciation would be transfixed by the play of color and light.

The lid and sides of the casket were edged with gold. The doll girl pointed at a place on the lid. There alone an emblem was engraved into the wood—a dragon undulating through the heavens.

“Just what I’d expect from him,” said the doll girl.

Setsura nodded. “And all the more reason to keep our distance.”

He took five paces backwards and then wrapped the casket with devil wire. The casket was made out of oak. Of particular concern was the apparent lack of any other security measures. Plucking at the devil wire like the strings of a harp told him that the wood was six inches at its thickest and an inch at its thinnest. Cutting it would be easy.

There was no need to hesitate. The summer days were long but would not last

forever. And when the night came, the creatures of the night would come out to play.

Setsura yanked on the wires. Without touching the occupants inside, the casket should have broken into a half-dozen pieces. But only the devil wires moved. Upon closer inspection, they hadn't left a mark on the surface.

"Of course. It must be the resin in the wood."

"What exactly? Strip it off and it should become clearer."

"Using fire?"

"I don't see any other way."

A gold lighter glittered in the doll girl's hand. It spat out a blue plasma flame the color of a welder's torch.

"Thirty thousand degrees."

But after applying the fierce flame to the surface, the brilliant finish showed not the slightest blemish or scorch mark.

"It can't be cut or burned. I don't expect a sledgehammer would do any better. I wouldn't be surprised if it could survive a small nuclear blast."

"Then—what?"

"I don't know what our next step should be. But *their* strategy is simple. They can stay put. They're immortal, after all."

"No doubt."

Silence fell. The summer sunlight possessed a certain serenity as well.

The big raven said in Galeen Nuvenberg's voice, "Leave the hall directly. Proceed twenty yards to the southwest. There you will find a cave. But that is only how it appears. Try as he might, the Clairvoyant cannot see inside it."

Part Seven: In the Face of Beauty

Chapter One

The raven completed its report. Setsura looked down. Eyes the color of the deep blue sea looked up.

"So we have found it," the adorable doll girl said. "Let's be on our way."

Setsura said, indicating the casket, "You wait here."

"Wait here?" The doll girl stared back at him. No need to add that the instruction made no sense to her.

Setsura continued, "I have an important favor to ask of you and the raven. The contents of this casket cannot be allowed to melt into the night. Nor can we allow him to sleep forever in this state. The casket is wrapped with my devil wire. Not even General Bey should be able to easily free himself. But somebody must keep watch until I return."

Setsura leaned over and reached out with his right hand. Golden light gleamed across the doll girl's face. "This is a crucifix your mistress gave me. You take it."

"I cannot. You need it more than I do."

"It will have no effect on the people I will encounter after this." Setsura took the doll girl's left hand, placed the crucifix in it and closed her fingers around it. Small, hard fingers.

"Small, hard fingers," the girl whispered to herself.

"I'm alive because of those hands," Setsura answered soberly. He straightened and turned his handsome face toward the place Nuvenberg had indicated.

"I'm going too," said the big raven, with a flap of its wings.

"No," said Setsura. "You are the connecting link between us and our guardian angels out there. Miss Nuvenberg may yet devise a way of opening the casket.

You wait also."

"No!" Now it was the doll girl who protested. "If I am to stay behind, then this bird should accompany you. Where you are going now is more dangerous than anywhere else in this park."

"Oh, for Pete's sake." Setsura rolled his eyes toward the heavens.

Fortunately, everyone there understood the seriousness underlying his droll evaluation of the situation.

The raven said, "It's like she says. I'll keep out of it. Eyes and ears only."

"If we cross paths, Princess won't be traveling outside the park this night. The same can't be said for Kazikli Bey. I saw his human butterfly collection. We can't allow that to continue. Besides—"

"Besides?"

Setsura smiled wryly. "This is my job. I was commissioned to find her by the man who so terribly wounded her pride. If I start taking on volunteers, I'll have to split the fee."

"And who was it who has made such unreasonable demands of you?"

Setsura's smile only grew more grave. Perhaps the only personage more frightening than the vampire princess—the Doctor—was now one of *them*. Galeen Nuvenberg was all but paralyzed. Yakou's whereabouts was presently unknown.

Dusk was falling and the sky was growing dark.

"You best be on your way." The raven spoke in Nuvenberg's voice. "I have faith in Shinjuku's best manhunter."

"You too, Miss Nuvenberg. You should relocate. I have no doubt that Special Forces soldiers will come looking for their colleagues."

"Understood. You take care. I will pray for your safe return."

"Thank you." Setsura said to the girl and the raven, as if he was stepping out to grab a beer, "Later."

"Just a moment, please," the doll girl said. "There is one thing that concerns

me.”

“What would that be?”

“You are now an ordinary human. And yet a human still caught up in the mollusk’s dream. Were you to change from the one to the other at the right—or wrong—moment, your enemies could not lay a hand on you. But neither could you they. Take this flute with you. In exchange for the crucifix.”

Setsura accepted the small instrument from the timid, outstretched hand. “Thank you. Friends like you are equal to an army.”

“Take care.”

“I will.”

A tone of rugged determination entered the doll girl’s voice. “Do not worry about the girl in the casket. The bird and I will save her.”

Setsura crouched down and looked the doll girl in the eyes. “Thank you.”

“Oh, my—” The doll girl put a hand to her chest. She would have blushed if she could.

“The first thing I do once we’ve settled this whole business, I’ll bring you all a fresh batch of *senbei*.”

“We’d be honored.” The doll girl smiled.

Setsura got to his feet and turned around. She watched him until he disappeared among the trees and said, “What is the right thing to say at times like this?”

The raven answered, “Hell if I know.”

Setsura arrived at the place Nuvenberg had told him about. He found a large gray tree whose limbs seemed to pierce the sky itself. It’d take ten big men with arms outstretched to ring its trunk. It wasn’t a single tree, but rather a solid mass of countless ivy-like vines entwined together.

He spotted the cave at once. The roots of the “tree” were wider in diameter than the trunk itself. Where they bored into the ground was a twisting crevice large enough to admit one person at a time.

Close as it was to the library, it was quite possible that a passageway connected them. As long as that was where General Bey kept his crypt, it stood to reason that a path back to Princess's world would be found nearby.

Setsura didn't hesitate. He threaded his way along the snake-like roots to the mouth of the cave. He played the flute as he walked, though he had no audience.

What was up with General Bey's casket? What would become of Takako? Would the doll girl and the raven remain safe? What would Special Forces Operational Detachment F do next? And how would Galeen Nuvenberg and Doctor Mephisto respond?

The weight of all he was leaving behind should have bowed his shoulders like a great boulder. But as the last light of dusk lit upon his bright countenance, the young *senbei* shop owner ducked into the cave as if out for an evening stroll.

Darkness wrapped around him. The odor of the earth still retained the heat of the day. He'd walked for several yards when a twisting sensation crawled across his skin.

As soon as it disappeared, the world filled with light. Setsura noticed that he was standing at the edge of a body of water.

A pond, perhaps those wise men of ancient China called it? Here were the waterways Mephisto had described—far shores shrouded in haze—green mountains in the distance—the landscape tastefully dotted here and there with arbors and gazebos—the sound of the wind made music, as if colored by the stands of trees—thin silver strands that must be waterfalls flowed down the mountains.

This was more a lake to be crossed in a ship than by boat.

Taking in these vistas, Setsura could hardly believe that these lovers of blood would exhibit such refined tastes. He murmured to himself, "No paths on the water and no ships to ply them. So how does one proceed?"

"How indeed?"

To say this reply was unexpected was the mother of all understatements. Setsura turned around, surprised but not startled. The woman's long dress fluttered in the breeze like the petals of a white flower.

“How nice of you to come.”

The relaxed and yet solemn tone suggested that she had anticipated Setsura’s arrival. The side of the face—that eclipsed even Setsura’s—smiled a strange smile. The other side of her face was hidden by a wave of her silky black hair.

The Demon Princess. Who else could have come to stand behind him undetected?

“Not—since that night,” Setsura said cryptically. On one such summer night, he alone had faced the four visitors.

“You are correct.” Princess parried in return. “After that night, we were so close once that not an inch separated us. Do you remember what occurred in the hospital?”

“No. But you do not strike me as a stranger.”

Where did such a comment come from? Far from either indifference or deference, there was cheek in the quip. Princess’s eyes sparked with fire. But only a spark. She smiled.

“Of course. This is the man who eluded my kiss without moving a muscle. So far from the norm. Things will only get so much more fun after this.”

“There’s no *after this*,” Setsura said casually. His striking features aside, nothing about this young man was threatening in the least.

“Hoh.” And an eerie laugh. The whistle of wind around the base of her neck. “Those same threads strung around your hospital room.” A fresh red welt ringed her throat. “I fought one wielding a similar weapon some three thousand years ago. Ah, what goes around, comes around. What have you been up to the past three millennia?”

She slowly ran her finger along the circumference of the thin ring. When she took away her finger, the death pallor had disappeared. “No matter where or how you cut me, the results are the same.” She added lightly, “You are several orders of magnitude more skilled than he ever was. But it makes no difference.”

“Did you come here to boast?” Setsura asked, as his eyes took in the magnificent building rising up behind her. “Four thousand years hasn’t done

anything for your personality. It is time to take some remedial steps."

"Kikiou met with your friend the Doctor. I have never before deigned to meet an intruder on my front steps."

"Well, I suppose that at least deserves a thank you."

She had shown his most clinching blow to be futile, and yet this remarkable man was still making note of the oddest details.

The air hummed again. Light shattered into a rainbow around them. The wire Setsura had flung divided the woman in two from the crown of her head down to her waist. And in the return stroke, sliced her torso horizontally as well.

"I told you there was no point," the Demon Princess said calmly. She blinked.

Without so much as a twitch, Setsura deflected her attack. And she neutralized his without lifting a finger. Had Setsura's defenses failed again, the failure would surely have spoken to the difference four thousand years can make.

Setsura shrugged. "Not yet."

"No, let us leave it at that," Princess said with a toss of her chin. A haughty gesture, though not a disagreeable one. "If you wish to see me dead so badly, you might as well come with me. You may yet take your efforts to the next level."

"Where to?"

"My house." Her white hands—whiter than her robes—pointed out her majestic residence. When Setsura didn't move, she asked, "A weight on your mind? What good comes from dwelling on what was left behind? There is no way back. The girl you sought is dead. You may have come here to save her, but it is time to let go. In its place, something else awaits you."

"Hmm," said Setsura, shaking his head.

"What?"

"I was thinking we might consider making advances of another kind."

Princess drew her brows together. It was a proposal she hadn't expected. "Is that what you wish?" Infuriated by this display of thick-headed obstinacy, her

eyes blazed.

“I came here to collect your head. Which isn’t to say that I can’t kill two birds with one stone. But I wouldn’t want to accept any initiations under dishonorable pretexts.”

“What a gentleman you are,” Princess sneered. Follow such feelings to their logical conclusion and she would rip out the throat of her victim and lap up his blood. That was the most natural of her instincts. “Perhaps you should die now.”

She raised her right hand. Setsura was not quite six feet from her. A white conduit streamed out like a column of water. The sleeve of her long dress.

It had almost brushed his cheek when Setsura leapt backwards, landing at the water’s edge. The white fabric danced toward him, as if toward its lover. In the next instance, it separated from the dress and fell to the earth.

“Splendid.”

“Aw shucks, it was nothing.”

“You are the fourth to rend my garment. The fourth in four thousand years. Many have tried. Most have failed. Have you rethought my invitation?”

“Well—”

“I shall certainly make it worth your time. Looking at hell can be such fun. Not necessarily frightening at all.”

She turned around and Setsura sensed the disturbance in the air from her movements. “A question, if you don’t mind?”

She said peevishly, “What?”

“Are you wearing perfume?”

“And what if I am?”

“No biggie. Just curious.”

He wasn’t sure why he wanted to know either. She may have been born in the sulfurous springs of Hades, but notions such as grooming and appearance were hardly foreign to such a beauty.

She’d already started walking, and he set off after her. Observing the building,

he asked, “You know a guy called Yakou?” Half of the building was shattered and scorched.

She didn’t answer. Facing away from him, Setsura didn’t see how she smiled to herself.

“You wouldn’t know how to open General Bey’s casket, perhaps?”

Again, no answer.

“What’s that?”

Approaching the building’s entranceway, a strange and disconcerting sight jumped out at him. A horde of people were setting a huge, jar-like cauldron—big enough to contain twenty large men—alongside the front foyer. This one must be the last, as this was the third in the row—each the same size and color—and nobody was coming along behind them.

“You’re intrigued?”

For the first time, Princess displayed actual interest in answering the question. “That is fodder.”

“As in food or for cannons?”

“Kikiou keeps them stashed away somewhere in this world. He brought them along for the defense of the mansion.”

Yakou’s attack seemed to have delivered a shock to their magical senses after all.

“So he is a scholar of the Hsia Dynasty,” Setsura observed, as they mounted the stone staircase to the front hall. “I’ve heard that wooden mannequins were imbued with life, and seawater and earth stirred together to make the fodder to feed them.”

“I don’t know about that. But he does do some strange shit.” Princess spoke in a tone of voice not entirely appropriate for commenting about a colleague. “The mischief of those living a facsimile of immortality. How do you know about him?”

“From the Toyama Elder.”

“He’s dead. Did you ask about me?”

Setsura nodded but didn’t elaborate. “How should I address you, anyway?”

“However you please.”

“Then no need to start using honorifics or anything.”

She didn’t reply.

They came to the top of the stone staircase and passed through the foyer. Princess stopped as Setsura exclaimed in surprise. The head of a huge beast appeared in the doorway.

A tiger.

Except that the uniquely identifying black stripes covered its head only. The rest of its body was pure white.

With a whooshing sound like a burst of steam from a coal-fired locomotive it reared up in front of Princess. The lush green body of a snake dotted with reddish-brown spots was attached to the tiger’s hindquarters. The bizarre tail whipped through the air with a mind of its own, flicking its red tongue and breathing its toxic breath on the white lady.

Fast as lightning, graceful as a willow, her hand closed around its neck. The snake’s eyes goggled. A look of fear never seen by mortal men.

The white tiger roared and reared up in a violent rage. Talons that could rip through an elephant’s hide swiped at Princess. Just as they touched her cheek, the creature went spinning backwards through the air.

Who could have believed that the mere flick of her dainty wrist could repel such an attack?

The earth shook. The animal howled. The heavens trembled. The writhing beast poised once more to attack. Princess held up her right hand.

“Hold on!” Kikiou came running down the hallway to the foyer.

Chapter Two

“My pardon. My pardon. Take your eyes away for a second and away they go.”

The otherworldly tiger fixed its ferocious eyes on Princess. Kikiou crept up behind it and seized it by the back of the neck. The murderous aura enveloping the beast’s huge frame vanished.

Princess asked in tones that could make a strong man shiver on a blistering hot day, “And who is this animal’s owner, Kikiou?”

“As this animal’s master, I bear full responsibility for such acts of insolence. Please let your will be known regarding it.” The old man bowed his head low.

“If you are this animal’s master, then who is *your* master?”

“That would be none other than Princess.”

“Which would make me the animal’s mistress.”

“Y-yes.”

He could not have been unaware of Setsura’s presence, but Kikiou lowered his head even further. That was how terrifying Princess could be, even to a colleague. “And as its mistress, I cannot countenance having one of your made-up, hand-fed creatures baring its fangs at me.”

Those words had barely left her mouth when a strange sound burst from the end of the tiger’s spine. She ripped the snake’s tail out by its roots, followed by a spray of blood—if that’s what the green substance was.

“Stop!”

Ignoring Kikiou’s command, the big beast whirled on Princess. Its blood-red gaping mouth swallowed Princess’s arm up to her shoulder. Tragedy awaited one or the other.

Princess yanked out her supposedly eaten arm. The sharp, white tusks banged onto the floor next to Setsura's feet. The beast howled and slumped to the ground, green blood spewing from its mouth.

Princess gazed down at it. Soon the only evidence of life was its quivering pelt. She said coldly, "Foolish thing," and shook her hand.

The pink tongue, more than a yard long, joined the tusks with a splat. This wasn't the result of a desperate struggle to the death, but Princess's intent all along. And why she had let the tiger have her hand in the first place. She wiped her left hand across her right arm. Not a spot of blood or gore remained.

"Leave."

"Yes."

Not a flicker of anger showed on Kikiou's face. He bowed. He glanced at the nearby jar-bearers. For the first time, Setsura observed a brief flash of ghastly light in those eyes. Gone a second later.

With a flutter of her white sleeves, the Demon Princess passed through the foyer with Setsura as Kikiou stood there, head bowed, looking for all the world like the Chinese equivalent of a faithful old Jeeves.

"Goddamned oversized monkey," the beautiful woman cheerfully intoned as they proceeded to the main hall. "A rare scholar of unusual guile and cunning. But he does play the fool at times. That creature was designed to attack you."

"I assumed as much," Setsura agreed with equal nonchalance. An onlooker might have mistakenly believed him to be taken by the colorful grandeur of the mansion. "Yourself aside, my presence doesn't seem to be welcome. I wouldn't want to cause a rift between you."

Princess reacted to Setsura's unusual concerns with a cold smile. "I go and come as I please. I don't consult with Kikiou."

"So it would seem," Setsura said.

No matter how many eras the scholar had surmounted, he still was not in the same league as the Demon Princess, who had personally destroyed three dynasties.

Bathed in blue light, the two of them continued on silently.

"Big house," Setsura observed blandly. "Must take two or three days to get from the front door to the bedroom. I haven't seen a single servant. Seems inconvenient."

"They're unnecessary."

"Why's that?"

"If I want to live in a large house, that doesn't mean I want a lot of riff raff underfoot. I choose to live my life as I see fit, according to my own whims and desires. Fuck a man when the mood strikes, drink a woman's blood when I feel peckish. If you know me, then you know the kings and kingdoms I have brought low. Do you think me cruel and heartless?"

"Well—"

"Emperor Jie of the Hsia Dynasty. Emperor Zhou of the Shang Dynasty. Emperor You of the Chou Dynasty. They perished in my arms. And none of them regretted it in the least. They vowed in their beds to give up their kingdoms and their people in exchange for the pleasures I bestowed upon them. And wouldn't you know, their wishes came true. Later generations would slander them as despotic fools led astray by a witchy woman. The envy of the ignorant. *That* is where a man's true happiness resides. The world for a pretty face, including their own souls. No fame or fortune can equal it. In my bedroom, those who speak ill of them would say the same things to these breasts of mine."

Her finger traced the hills and valleys of her décolletage. The flesh trembled at her touch. Neither in dreams nor in ancient memories had any mortal man withstood the restless carnality of her magnificent body. The appetites of this succubus's blood forever drove its lascivious fangs into the heart of the here and now.

She was the incarnation of the inexhaustible lusts of the human world.

"Here." She stopped.

Without descending any slope or staircase, they had gone underground at some point. Setsura could sense with his entire body the great mass of the earth looming above his head.

The Demon Princess at last reached out to a door set into the wall. A black iron door. The hinges creaked.

“Please, go ahead.”

“You don’t want to escort the guest?”

“That would spoil the surprise. The mysteries that await you here have no equal elsewhere.”

“Being preached to by a vampire—sounds like the name of a movie.”

Setsura passed through the doorway like a tourist at a hot springs resort sauntering into the sauna.

The hallway was about as wide as the door and bent around in a gentle curve. The wall on the right was made of wood. On the left, beneath the finely-engraved handrail, tracing the outer circumference of the pathway, was an elliptical opening.

A nasty odor assaulted his nostrils. A pungent, rotten smell. The dark earth was dotted with red-black lumps. Like animal droppings. Setsura’s eyes were drawn to a pair of black bars crossed fifteen feet above the ground, each about eight inches wide and made of iron.

Behind him, Princess asked, “Do you understand what this is?”

“*Dear Emperor, lay two iron shafts across the caldron in the shape of a cross. Your servants shall walk across the branding iron and scald their feet and tumble into the hell fire*. Emperor Zhou’s idea of fun, I take it.”

“Exactly. You’ve never seen one with your own two eyes.”

“Of course not.”

Emperor Zhou of the Shang had taken the advice of the demoness Daji, forcing victims to walk across the red-hot iron and cling to it as lions and tigers waited in the writhing hell below for their dinner to fall to them.

Setsura stopped.

“Oh? Why do you hesitate?” chimed Princess’s voice, full of mirth. “I brought you all this way so I could have someone to share old memories with. Look—”

She spoke as grandly as she always did. “Let us cut to the chase. In the four thousand years since the demise of Shang, unknown numbers have sampled the pleasures Emperor Zhou first tasted here in this subterranean chamber. I do not know for what purpose you exist on the earth, but insight into what tickles the heart of a king can’t hurt.”

“Good grief.” The physical weariness in this reply was likely not an act. Though any vestiges of a haggard expression just as quickly vanished.

The oval hall was sixty feet across at its longest, thirty feet at its most narrow. At the far end of the iron shaft forming the major diameter, a human figure appeared.

“Relax. It’s not real. All visions of what was done back during the Shang Dynasty. Even so, you can taste the boiling blood well enough to enjoy all its dark joys.”

The Demon Princess sounded very far away. Setsura gazed at the spectacle, as if her voice had stolen away a piece of his soul.

The phantom was a voluptuous young woman. More than her vivacious naked body, what drew the attention was the look of fear staining her features. More than the raw scars on her thighs and her breasts—over which her hands were placed—this look spoke to the fate she had been delivered to, and the reality she was yet to face.

“A farmer’s wife. The executioner told her that she could return to her family if she crossed the bar successfully.”

The naked girl set off with unusually sure steps. The hope of returning to her family surely steadied her balance and disciplined her fear. She arrived at the intersection of the two shafts in under five minutes, an impressive feat.

Setsura’s eyes strayed from the girl to the remaining half of the shaft. Only inches from her toes, the red glow of the iron was obvious. By the result of some unseen technology, the scorching heat arose only from the remaining thirty feet of the shaft.

The girl froze in place. She looked back the way she came, but soon abandoned that option. Perhaps hidden soldiers brandishing spears.

She had two options—the shorter iron shaft intersecting at right angles. But looking to the right and left, she trembled with a newly aroused sense of despair.

Two shadows crouched at the ends of the shaft. Human on the right. A four-legged beast on the left.

The girl first gave the human figure a closer look. But lost hope again. Wrapped in a long blue robe was the mannequin of a young man. Glancing left, her feet froze. The beast resembled a large dog. But only the head. The body had the color and spots of a leopard. Two horns projected from above its snout like those of a bull.

"A dog with the spots of a leopard and the horns of a bull—that is a *jiao* dragon, as described in a collection of ancient geographical surveys known as the *Shan Hai Jing*."

The creature roared, as if answering Setsura's musings on its name and etymology. A ferocious, intimidating sound.

Which way to run? Which of these four dreadful fates to choose? The girl stood at the crossroads and pondered her options. Finally, she resolutely turned to the right, toward the young male mannequin. With each step, the place her feet had just left burned red hot. There was no retreat.

"They always make the same choice," Princess said behind him. There was none more beautiful, and none more evil. "Save one. A brave man. He was eaten by the *jiao*." She laughed. "That was the correct decision."

Her meaning soon became clear.

As the girl approached the mannequin, he slowly raised his arms. She froze for a second, but there being no other option left open to her, she quickened her pace, hitting the mannequin head on even as his arms reached out to her.

The arms wrapped around her waist with the zeal of a lover. The girl pressed her palms against the sturdy chest but he hugged her all the tighter. She must have realized the gravity of her mistake when the mannequin placed one hand on the back of her head and turned her face around, and pressed its hard mechanical mouth against hers.

Against her lips, moist even in the throes of terror.

She struggled and squirmed, but the mannequin's steel-like arms stole away her freedom. Her legs found no purchase. Something bittersweet and fragrant plied open her teeth. The mannequin's tongue.

She gagged, and cried out as another unmistakable sensation radiated from between her legs. Without looking down, she knew that a rent had opened in the mannequin's robe. He had penetrated her.

Even choking to death, her throat eerily quivered, and she swallowed him deeper.

The mannequin was endowed with a wooden cock more generously shaped and finely made than that of the best man alive. And functioned as must the dildo of the gods. He buried its throbbing length inside her. Gasps of pleasure escaped her lips. No man had or could ever have fucked her so, such were the pleasures produced by this perverse union.

The girl abandoned all sense and comity, ramming her hips against his, taking him deeper and deeper. His wood thrust and pulsed and made her come and come in ecstasy. Her back bent like a bow. Her body spasmed. She screamed, something female but no longer human.

The mannequin opened his arms and released her. Her sensuous body—sparkling even—tumbled down into the pit.

Setsura felt the impact up through the soles of his feet.

"Such a happy girl. But that well must run dry. She is still alive. Thanks to that mannequin's tongue, for it possessed yet another special property."

The woman's body writhed where she had fallen hard onto the ground. She was lying on her back. Her breasts swayed. Her thighs glistened. She could not walk, perhaps because her legs were broken.

The roars of animals all around her, their species unknown but clearly carnivorous. Moaning in pain, the girl had returned to her senses sufficiently to take note of her surroundings.

The gasping girl lay almost directly in the center of the pit. Mythological beasts like the one Setsura encountered in the foyer paced around her. One placed its forefoot lightly on her chest. Seemingly on the verge of sinking its

tusks into her fear and sweat-stained body—on the verge of death—it instead licked her with its long, rough tongue.

Another joined it and licked her head. Another, her arms and sides. Another, her nether regions.

“Look at that! Her limbs broken, her internal organs ruptured, and yet she is satisfied. Such is human nature. Who can dare find fault with Emperor Zhou? The substance inside her body emits a smell that arouses them. Oh dear, licking her isn’t enough. They’re tearing off her breasts. Oh my, now they’re biting off her neck. They’re flipping her over. Oh well, it’s all good. They so love mounting dead women.”

The Demon Princess laughed hysterically. Then her words froze like ice. Setsura turned his back to her.

But was it Setsura? Princess heard a hoarse sound in her ears—the sound of her own voice. “Who the hell are you?”

The answer came just as quickly. The shadow in the black slicker glanced over his shoulder at her and said softly, “Setsura Aki.”

And that was who it was.

A transfixing countenance that crystallized the darkness of the night and the radiance of the moon, that shushed the howling of the wind. The beautiful body that supported it on its strong shoulders. The mesmerizing and yet dignified gaze. Nothing had changed at all.

Except what was inside it.

In a pleasant, comely tone, Setsura Aki asked, “Shall we have at it again, Princess?” Like a demon. Like Rakshasa, the Hindu devil. “As I am now, the cut may prove fatal this time around.”

There was no answer. Princess looked down at her feet. Her lips trembled. Anger and loathing permeated her dusky voice. “I was moved—” The product of fear perhaps. “I have lived in fear of people for four thousand years. I won’t forgive it. I shall never forgive it. Not from you, and not in myself.”

A red glow reflected off Setsura’s eyes—the fires of hell burning in hers. Even

as they stood there on the narrow way, she wished to rampage through the whole wide world above them and reduce it to ashes.

Those eyes suddenly wavered. A small smile rose to her lips. Ah, but what a smile it was, as bewitching as it was cruel.

She whispered, “I had originally intended to meet with you in another room. But my wounded honor demands recompense. This is more appropriate for that —the trial by fire that turned the Emperor himself into a bawdy beast. Behold—”

Princess pointed at the end of the hallway, where another iron door was set into the wall. It didn’t appear to be open. Except that a human figure suddenly appeared standing there.

“Of course,” Setsura Aki said.

It was Yakou.

“He is my servant,” Princess said gaily. “He shared my bed, clasps me to his chest, and swears undying fealty. Yet he hunted me down as your colleague. I so want to see the blood flow, each of you stealing the other’s life to preserve his own.”

She turned her ruby red eyes upon him.

“Her wish is my command,” Yakou said. His mien and voice were only slightly different from what Setsura remembered, lending to this statement an all the more uncanny feeling.

“Are you game, Setsura Aki?”

“Fine with me.” He replied without hesitation.

This Setsura felt no sentimentality toward a friend. Yakou was an enemy under the command of the Demon Princess. That was all. Expecting from him a great show of angst, Princess’s eyes flickered with malice.

“Setsura.”

“Understood.”

The two of them vaulted over the railing with the grace of world-champion gymnasts. The mannequin and *jiao* were gone—no doubt Princess’s doing—and

the two confronted each other above the cold and black iron shafts.

Setsura Aki and Yakou.

Doctor Mephisto had become a vampire. And now even Yakou bared his fangs. Would the time ever come when Setsura was not left to fight this fight alone?

“Bring it on.” Yakou struck a fighting pose.

Setsura knew nothing of the demon *qi* that had sent Kikiou flying apart.

With a state of nothingness—that exceeded even the strongest blood lust—as their mediator, the genie and the vampire launched into a duel to the death.

Chapter Three

The sound came from General Bey's casket at sunset. Now more familiar with the behavior of vampires, the doll girl and the big raven were not startled in the least.

The doll girl said to the raven, a cool exuberance creeping into her voice, "Looks like he's up, Grandma."

The raven's red tongue flicked from its pointed beak. "Wait a little while longer," said Galeen Nuvenberg. "I am expecting somebody any minute. I assume the casket is sealed?"

"Yes, by Aki-san's threads."

"In that case, not even Kazikli Bey should easily free himself. Come the night, he would have trusted in his immortal body and once again crossed swords with Setsura. Settling the score, though, won't prove easy. However, should he break the seal, you two are to flee at once."

"But then we wouldn't be able to save Kanan-san. I promised Aki-san."

"I wouldn't have come all this way for a man who asked others to sacrifice their lives for his cause. Don't give him any more reasons to mourn than he already has."

"And neither do I wish to give him any more reasons to mourn."

"If that is how you really feel, then I surely made a mistake while making you."

The doll girl had no answer.

"That man is Demon City's manhunter. That is not an occupation that can be accomplished without understanding what moves every mind in this world. Do you think the kind of man who sees the self as a mere article of commerce could

ever attract followers? That man even knows the heart of a doll."

"But—"

"So, wait. I contacted the mayor not five minutes ago. In another twenty minutes—Well, I'll be!"

"What is going on?"

"I knew the cockroaches would be coming out of the woodwork, but not this soon. And in number."

"Grandma, do you mean vampires?"

"I was afraid it might come down to this. Just in case the rest of the SDF came looking for the advance party, I secluded myself here in the ruins of the Park Hyatt Hotel. Unfortunately, it looks like I've encountered some unintended consequences."

"You should depart with all due haste," said the doll girl. She looked to her side. The casket was beginning to wobble back and forth.

"Has it begun to move?" asked the big raven. "This Bey chap must be getting flustered as well. He can't leave his own house. Just what I would expect from Setsura Aki. Those devil wires alone are beyond my ken. But no need to worry. I may be confined to this wheelchair, but this old Czech witch still has her wits about her."

"I will trust in your abilities then. But, Grandma, you still—"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Oh, they're coming. Twenty of them. At this rate, it won't be long before Shinjuku changes into something completely unrecognizable. Pale faces and bared fangs everywhere you look."

"Grandma—"

A strong rumbling in the earth spun the doll girl around. Alighting lightly on her feet, her blue eyes focused on the madly shaking casket.

It bounced a yard above the ground and crashed down. And again. Like a fisherman with a half-ton marlin on the end of the line.

More heavy impacts. A barrage of blows on the lid of the casket from the

inside. Bound with the devil wire, the lid didn't budge in the slightest.

The sound stopped. The casket lay there, black and still in the falling darkness.

"Setsura Aki? Are you there?" The muffled voice rumbled from inside the casket.

"Sure am," said the raven, mimicking Setsura exactly.

"Open this casket. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise—what?"

The raven's laid-back, pitch-perfect impersonation even prompted a surprised look from the doll girl.

A woman's scream soared toward the sky.

"Kanan-san?"

"Exactly."

General Bey's baritone laughter mingled with the soprano of a high-pitched scream, like nails drawn across an endless blackboard.

"Open it immediately. Undo those wires. If you do not, this girl will suffer the torments of hell."

The doll girl turned to the raven and was about to say something, but thought better of it. Their enemy was no common thug, but a demon lord that had felled even Setsura Aki. It was becoming obvious that it was in their best interests to maintain the facade that Setsura was still here.

The raven continued with the negotiations. "Release Kanan-san. Or this casket will burn."

The general laughed at Setsura's—the raven's—threat. "If you could have done that, it would already be open. You sealed it because you cannot. This casket was made by a wizard of unparalleled skills. Come the end of the world, and I shall live on as long as I remain inside it. He guaranteed as much in blood. I cannot leave. But you cannot enter. We shall enjoy the girl's sweet terror together."

A second scream that could split stone and pierce the eardrums of human and

fowl alike. The raven was at a loss for words.

“Open it,” commanded General Bey, as if sensing their anguish.

The raven covered its face with its wing. And before taking it away said, “I can’t.”

“What?”

“If I let you out, you will spawn ten more like her in a single night. That cannot be allowed. I’m sorry, Kanan-san. I’ll never forget you. I will store General Bey’s casket at the bottom of the river forever.”

“Wait—”

The raven checked its rage. “So, General, if you are going to kill Kanan-san, best you get it over with quickly. By no means—”

The raven let the sentence trail off and gave the doll girl a wink.

“By no means—what?” The lord of darkness spoke as if he were fully in the position to lord himself over them. “Do not make her one of us, you mean?”

The raven’s silence continued.

“You are a skilled negotiator. Fine, then. I shall do as you desire. I will send your lover to meet her maker without making her one of us. Knowing that, go ahead and bury me in the earth or sink me in the river.”



The raven continued to say nothing, but gave the doll girl another knowing look. It had confirmed that Takako Kanan was not a vampire. And the general had guaranteed that she would not be changed into a vampire. Two birds, one stone. The performance of a lifetime.

“Let me think it over.” A pause. “Agreed. That is very shrewd of you. I suppose it will not kill me to spend the night at home. I shall wait one night. Then we may come to our separate conclusions. No matter what you say, this woman must be important to you.”

The voice ceased. As did Takako’s screams. A moment later, shadows darker than the night blanketed the strange duo. A fierce gale beat down. As the two of them stared in blank surprise, a dark green machine set down in the courtyard.

The stealth aircraft was at least forty feet from tip to tail. It was an SSQ 474 Hawk, the tactical transport helicopter currently preferred by the world’s militaries. The blades were still rotating as the side door opened.

“Grandma,” the doll girl called out softly.

“Come here. This is a little present from the mayor.”

Galeen Nuvenberg’s white hair danced in the downdraft of wind. The two official-looking suited men standing on either side of the wheelchair jumped down. In their hands was a big steel hook.

Realizing what they were about to do, the doll girl called out, “Be careful! The slightest contact will lose you your fingers.”

Too late. The two men groaned and grasped their hands. As soon as they touched the casket, five of their fingers dropped to the ground.

The doll girl struggled through the gale to the helicopter. “Grandma—how shall we proceed?”

Galeen Nuvenberg didn’t answer the question, but said, indicating the wide-eyed man next to her, “This is the mayor. The casket would best be entrusted to the Hazmat division. The underground storage facilities at the ward government buildings were suggested earlier. Perhaps here is just as safe. We can always arrive at a solution later.”

After Setsura's departure, Nuvenberg had also informed the doll girl that she would rely on the mayor's resources to move General Bey's casket.

"Fine with me." Mayor Kajiwara nodded politely to the doll girl. A man who didn't know to pay his respects to an animated doll didn't deserve to be mayor of Shinjuku. "We are in something of a fix here. The casket isn't going anywhere. Aki-kun's devil wires will cut through chains and cables as easily as yarn. Does the Czech Republic's—no, the world's—best witch have no other alternatives?"

He damned with faint praise, and made no attempt to mask the irony. Nuvenberg smiled wryly in turn. This was Demon City and the mayor always had his reasons.

"It can't wait until tomorrow?" she asked with a sideways glance.

"Can you guarantee that what's inside it won't escape? Or that having met with Aki-kun, the Demon Princess won't notice and come riding to the rescue?"

"Aren't you the taskmaster," Nuvenberg said.

"No." The doll girl seized her wrinkled old wrist. "You are ill, Grandma. Expending so much energy can't be good for your health. And with Doctor Mephisto—"

"What about Doctor Mephisto?" Kajiwara demanded in an uncharacteristically heated manner.

"Seems he was bitten by a vampire," Nuvenberg sternly replied.

"In that case, hurry up and stake him and we'll muster the troops." He pressed his right hand to his chest and glared back at her. "Enough with the bad jokes. You're going to give me a heart attack."

"Understood," said Galeen Nuvenberg. "We'll figure it out one way or another. Let's bring those two aboard. Sorry to have to say it, but it looks like we've got another job for you to do."

Part Eight: Demon Night Falling

Chapter One

Setsura focused his attention on Yakou's right hand. They could each predict the other's next move. Yakou's hands were the conduits of his *qi*. And he had a dominant hand. Setsura guessed he'd jab with his left the same way a right-handed boxer would.

These two who once fought side-by-side now fought each other. But neither held any sentimentality for the past or anger about the present. The gloves were off.

Yakou locked his hands together in front of his chest. His left hand extended, his palm facing forward. The massive *qi* sprang forth—the same that had scattered Kikiou in all directions.

The burst of power neatly divided high and low. Yakou flew backwards. He landed apparently unharmed and looked at his chest. A razor-straight cut through his suit and vest and shirt. A thin line of blood welled up on the skin.

Had he jumped a split-second later, his torso would have been cleaved in two. The merciless attack brought a smile to his graceful face. Somewhere at the back of his mind, the naive expectation that he could take it easy was cast to the wind.

This was the Setsura he knew. And the Setsura he did not. They had met at last. He felt a deeply poignant chime of emotion in his cold, cold heart.

The air hummed as Setsura pressed forward with his attack. He feinted, slashing downward from the left, while the strand of devil wire aimed at Yakou's heart bounced up from his feet.

He ducked to the right, bending at right angles. An impossible contortion of the human form.

With a roaring rush of wind, Yakou soared upward, his wings beating against the darkness. He was master of the air.

“It stands to reason,” Setsura blandly observed as he pursued him. “The Elder’s grandson should have skills no one else possesses.”

“Cannot Setsura Aki take to the skies?” mused Yakou, looking down on the manhunter from thirty feet above the iron shafts. “Shall we test our skills at the crossroads?”

He had, in military terms, air superiority, while Setsura had only two iron shafts to tread upon. It would not do to overestimate his tactical advantage, but his words revealed an overwhelming confidence.

“Why not?” said Setsura.

Yakou unleashed his demon *qi*. One bolt at Setsura. One in front of him. One behind. One of them surely had his name on it.

But instead he went sideways.

No sooner had Yakou realized that Setsura had flung one of his wires out to the side and taken that new road, Setsura’s right hand reached up. As if drawing a flittering moth into the spider’s web, the net of devil wire closed around Yakou’s body, leaving no space in which he could flap his wings.

Setsura’s eyes narrowed as Yakou tucked himself into a spin, threading between the mesh of the net. In a whirl, folding and unfolding, miraculously sculling the air, riding on the wind, his wings bore him to safety past the countless barbed knives.

Yakou did a one-eighty as he fell, his hand jutted out at the air.

Setsura dodged at the last second. The wall behind him did not break or crumble. The energy ricocheted and poured down on him, now perched in the air several yards lower.

On the verge of scoring a direct hit on his head, Setsura’s dark slicker traced an arc through the air. Yakou had already steadied himself and readjusted his stance when Setsura swung like the weight at the end of a pendulum, over and around, his head coming to a halt upside down, exactly at Yakou’s height.

Setsura was riding the devil wires wound around his shoes. As they were invisible to the naked eye, he looked like a bat hanging from an invisible ceiling.

“Well—” Setsura said.

“Well—” Yakou smiled.

The eagle with command of the sky hurled a mass of killer *qi*. The bat dancing along invisible bridges in the air cast his magical threads. A battle to the death between two supernatural wizards. They would soon forget everything else and fight like this forever.

The only thing holding them back was a woman’s voice, trembling with agitated fury. “That is enough, Yakou.”

The Elder’s grandson drew his brows. “I understand, but—”

“No. I know how you wished to duel Setsura. And Setsura accepted without hesitation. Which is why this conflict must be settled at some other time.”

“And the reason?”

“Because the two of you are enjoying yourselves so.” Princess settled against the railing and explained with all her vexing charm, “Some sentiment toward each other as allies must remain in both you and Setsura, which I had hoped would arouse within you some degree of suffering. But far from blood, sweat and tears, you are fighting with heart and soul and joy. Whatever the outcome, it will not sate my hunger. Do not kill him. Not here. You won’t fight here. Setsura Aki, I will give you another reason to mourn.”

The Demon Princess raised her voice. A thin line of spittle trickled from the corner of her red mouth. Hatred and an entirely different emotion were roiling the soul of this uncommon witch.

Eyeing the two men below her, her bountiful breasts jouncing, she let go of the railing with as graceful a move as had ever been set into motion.

“Come with me, this Setsura Aki I do not know. To the gates of hell.”

Princess cast him an indescribable look as she walked with rapid steps down the hallway.

Setsura followed her. First, because the will to fight Yakou to the death had been drained dry. And second, because killing such a demoness in his current condition was well-nigh impossible.

He was not a young man who feared dying in vain, except that if not for him, the undead would breed in Shinjuku like cockroaches.

They left the pit and proceeded to a room behind a black door. Princess disappeared into the center of the room. Setsura heard the door locking behind him. Yakou had tailed them from the pit. Whether he was now outside in the hall or elsewhere, his presence had vanished as well.

The darkness wrapped around Setsura, heavy and clinging. The smell of blood was in the air. There weren't pools of blood nearby. It was in the air itself, as if the molecules of hemoglobin had attached themselves to the molecules of oxygen and nitrogen. Surely this was the result of the room being soaked in blood for an eternity. Breathe the air for long, and the lungs would draw in the blood just as a fish breathes through its gills.

"Come," resounded a voice from the back of the room.

Simply imagining the scene that voice conjured up, any other man would have gotten hard and come at the same time. And over and over until he was wrung dry. Hers was a voice that would arouse the most impotent man.

Setsura sauntered across the room. He knew that the room was furnished, but his five senses detected neither the shape nor size of the furnishings. A door opened at the very depths of the gloom. The odor of blood increased an order of magnitude.

"Enter," he was commanded, almost impatiently.

Setsura stepped into the light. Something soft caught his attention. A gold-embroidered quilt covering a four-post canopy bed. Everything was suffused with a pale blue light. The light seemed to pour into the room like water, though Setsura couldn't ascertain its source.

"Come here," gestured the white figure on the futon.

Voluptuousness radiated from her woman's face. What an unearthly allure. The licentious smile rising to her transfixing features, over which seemed to crawl an army of insects—the black hair covering half her face. The one eye brimmed with a corrupt vermillion color of evil that would make blood look cold by comparison.

Her tongue, slippery wet as a leech, flicked out from between her lips and drew back in again. One lick of that tongue could raise the dead.

Below her face, a white arm raised up and beckoned, calling to him.

Setsura stepped forward. And then back again. That movement alone triggered a mighty contest of wills. Sweat trickled down his cheeks.

“What enormous reservoirs of self-denial you have.” Princess’s laughter deepened. “But for it, there would not be such discord between us. The more you resist, the harder it becomes to escape. You won’t get away, you awful, awful man.”

“Shall we call ourselves a couple, then?” Setsura asked. As nonchalant as the question was, a hint of hoarseness was unavoidable. “Let’s stipulate a few conditions to the prenup though. First, permission to cut off your head and drive a stake through your heart. Second, the true nature of this world, and the means by which it can be destroyed. Third, a way to destroy the casket of Kazikli Bey.”

“What a sense of humor you have! I never would have guessed. Ah, this is the man I know. How do you imagine I shall reply?”

“I do not imagine you shall,” Setsura said, with a shake of his head.

It would be hard to say at this point which of them was kidding and which of them was playing it straight.

“Then how shall we proceed?”

“Search me.”

“Your prenup is fine by me.”

However briefly, Setsura couldn’t help reacting. Had Kikiou been there, he would have fainted dead away.

“However, only provisions two and three—the destruction of this world and the disposition of General Bey.”

“You are an outrageous woman,” Setsura honestly replied. Come to think of it, she was always the one setting the terms. “You’d sell out your colleagues to get what you want? After four thousand years, I guess your shame was the first thing to go.”

“I lost nothing. I never had it to start with,” Princess grinned. She couldn’t have toppled three ancient dynasties otherwise. “This is not the way I would prefer to travel the world. It’s all Kikiou.”

“Huh.” Setsura was struck by the curious confession. “You mean, going along to get along, bending to others’ whims, while jerking those same people around. A puppet regime.”

“Exactly. If they want to rule the world, they’re free to. As my servant, Kikiou can make use of Ryuuki and Shuuran and bury humanity six feet under, if he so chooses. He can play his Machiavellian games and watch the streets run red with blood. Only keep me out of it.”

“I’ve heard of sparing the rod and spoiling the child, but you take irresponsibility to extremes. The miracle here isn’t that anyone would have you as their leader, but that you could keep any group together for four thousand years. Frankly, this is more miraculous than eternal life.”

“I do not recall anybody putting me in charge of anything.” She turned away. The futon rippled, like a snake sleeping beneath the cover had woken up. “I told them to suit themselves. That is all they did. Were anything here to become so disagreeable, I would leave forthwith and find me a king or potentate or ruler and fill his dreams with stories of Hsia and Shang.”

“And? So you bewitch the president of America or Russia and bend him to your will. But overdo things and what happened in Romania in times past will surely happen again.”

“I believe that was the intent when we came to this city not so long ago.”

“The last time you came out into the open was the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France. What have you been up to since? Planning the takeover of Shinjuku?”

“That does indeed seem to have been what Kikiou was up to.”

“Don’t pass the buck. You speak Japanese too, don’t you?”

“I learned it because I wanted to learn it. Not because I had any desire to subjugate this city.”

“You mean killing the Elder was a mere whim as well?”

A pitying look came to the Demon Princess’s eyes. “You haven’t heard? I fought him eight hundred years before in the city now known as Beijing. We’ve been at it a while.”

“An actual reason, huh? I’m impressed. And after this? Whatever Kikiou has in mind?”

“If I said yes?”

“I’ll have to destroy you.”

“You have not proved yourself capable of the task yet.”

“I will use a stake this time.”

“I have been staked before.”

“Your heart is located on your right side.”

Princess laughed long and hard. “Fascinating,” she giggled. “I wouldn’t have believed a man in this world could make me laugh. I’m not letting this little fishy off my hook.”

“And the previous stipulations?” Setsura pressed.

“If I fulfill them, will you become my partner?”

“I’d need a little time to think it over.”

“You must decide now.” Her eye flashed red. “No, as long as you’re still around, I’ll do the deciding.”

“Isn’t General Ryuuki already your favorite retainer?”

“The voyage did not suit that man well.” There was a shadow in her voice that Setsura chose to ignore. “He left here, never to return. I did think of pursuing him, but there’s no need now, seeing as you are so eager to take his place.”

“Got tired of being used by a woman, did he?”

“The laborer was rewarded for his work.”

“Meaning?”

“Behold—”

She took hold of the corner of the futon and pulled it back, revealing her naked body. “What do you think? A reward worth a man’s soul, wouldn’t you say? Judging by your face, not altogether displeasing. You will soon understand why, even though the whole world may be against me, I harbor no regrets. Come.”

The Demon Princess thrust out her hands as if presenting an offering at the altar. Her hips rose up. Hardly the movement of human flesh on human bone. More like that of a white reptile.

The ruby light flashed in her eye. The beautiful genie’s whole body stiffened. And then just as quickly lost its tension. Ryuuki’s demon *qi* festered in his gut. Princess’s wound scarred his chest. Both were far from healed.

She lowered her right arm. Setsura slumped forward. Beneath his gaze, she spread her legs wide.

“Lick me,” she said.

Setsura stepped closer, lowering his face toward the Demon Princess’s most private and untouchable place—

“Excuse me—”

The raspy voice came from the direction of the door.

Chapter Two

Setsura stopped in his tracks.

“What is this about?” Princess furiously demanded.

Kikiou bowed low. “A matter that demands your immediate attention.”

“What?”

“Hand Setsura Aki over to me.”

“To you? To what end?”

“To destroy him.”

“After a little while longer.”

“And what is *a little while longer* to you?”

“Until I am tired of him.”

“With Ryuuki, that was two thousand years.”

“And having ended his life so hastily, then what?”

Kikiou shrugged. “Do with the corpse as you wish. Cast him out on the streets and let the dogs at him. In any event, I must take Setsura Aki’s life as soon as possible.”

“You said the same thing about Ryuuki.”

“The hearts of this man and that one have nothing in common. Ryuuki was obedient to his fate. Saving him gave his life meaning. Covertly and overtly, he strove always to protect our interests. But this man—”

“Is different?”

“Night and day, such that it frightens me. More than Ryuuki, more than Shuuran, and even more than you—if my diagnosis proves correct, Setsura Aki

is closer to you than any man you have met in four thousand years."

"To me?" Princess laughed gaily and for some time. "What are you trying to say? This man is the genuine article."

"Flesh and bone is not the distinguishing characteristic between man and magic," Kikiou stated firmly. He looked at Setsura—standing there stock still—and there was yet fear in his eyes. "There are humans possessed of hearts and souls more frightening than ours. Setsura Aki is the archetype. If we do not strike him down now, the cause of great travails will remain with us."

"You disapprove of my handling of him?"

"Yes, I do." Sweat streamed down the old scholar's forehead. Considering the construction of his body, it was a rather strange phenomenon.

"Well, there's no killing him. Especially *now*."

The cold tendrils of the woman's voice crept along the ground and wound around the feet of Kikiou and Setsura.

"I—understand," said the plainly discouraged Kikiou.

"That look on your face is at odds with your answer. Fine. Come here."

"Eh?"

Kikiou looked at where the woman's white arm rested on the futon. And then at Setsura.

"I have never been ashamed to be seen by others. Not at any age." The Demon Princess chuckled. A flash of pink illuminated her breasts and inner thighs. "The more you feel the eyes of strangers upon you, the more excitable you become. That has always been your predilection. It has been a good thousand years since the last time we fucked, but that alone certainly has not changed."

Kikiou didn't answer. Instead, he cast off his robe and stood at the side of the bed, his strange body fully exposed.

Princess's eyes fell to his waist. She smiled, observing the prominent sign of vigorous manhood rising inexorably to attention there. And no clockwork device. The real thing.

“Far too splendid for a mere scholar to have in his possession. On its account, you were driven from the palace of Emperor Zhou. Obviously you could not part with it even then.”

Kikiou’s reply was a low groan as Princess grabbed its firm, long length. “My, as big as ever. And hot. Shall we see how it performs, Kikiou, right here and now?”

With a contemptuous glance at the old man’s agony, Princess turned the side of her face to Setsura.

“Princess, with your mouth,” Kikiou pleaded.

She ran her red lips along the ring revolving inside his torso. Her lipstick left a long crimson streak on the metal surface. With teasing reluctance, she closed her mouth around his manhood.

The old man’s satisfied cries rose almost to a scream. “*Princess—Ahhh—Princess—I’m—coming—*”

“Exercise a little self-control. You certainly last longer with Shuuran.”

“*Not—like this—that little bitch—never like—this—*”

The electrifying sound of her moist, lapping lips silenced his begrudging howls. The old man’s back bent like a willow. She took him in, all of him into her mouth.

“Drink it down. Drink me dry. Drink me—”

The scholar’s passion-crazed gaze focused on the woman’s pale throat and watched her swallow with a great look of satisfaction on his face.

“You had enough?”

“N-no—” Kikiou breathed heavily.

“And neither have I. It is your turn to apply yourself.”

“But—”

“Did you turn into an impotent geezer, Kikiou?”

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and reached out toward his midsection. Within the rhythmic grasp of her fingers, the licentious life returned.

All at once, the old man's member pulsed with hard heat.

Letting go of him, she turned her backside to him, her smooth, white, quivering ass.

"Princess—" Kikiou mumbled into empty space. He seized the hips of his mistress and rammed his length inside her. Even before he'd fully penetrated her, she was grinding away with her hips.

The old man moaned. Princess moaned. Kikiou laughed through clenched teeth. At these times alone, he had Her Highness right where he wanted her—pinned between his knees.

A long gasp emerged from Princess's parted lips. "*Ahh—Kikiou—Kikiou—Give me your blood—*"

"I refuse."

"What?"

"You want me to stop?"

"No."

"Then ask nicely. I want to hear you plead."

"Are you mad?"

"Quite. I will take whatever punishment you desire later. Now you are my slave."

"Idiot."

Kikiou thrust with all his might and she arched her back violently. The old servant's cock took command over the young mistress's pussy.

"Ask me. Say please. Or I'll stop."

"You can't stop. You can't—" She shook her head, tossing her disheveled hair, her voice tight and strained.

"Say please. Say it like you mean it."

"Please—please—give it to me."

"And so I will. Look at Setsura."

“What are you up to, Kikiou?”

“Show him. Show him how we make the beast with two backs. Show yourself at my mercy. Show him how this belongs to me. Oh God, why is your pussy so hot? Tell me. Why?”

“God only knows.”

“Whose ass is this right now? Tell him.”

“General Ryuuki’s—”

“That was then. This is now.”

Kikiou bared his teeth. This perverse role-play reversal unhinged him. He bent over and sank his teeth into the soft flesh.

She screamed.

“Your ass is mine. Say it. What was once Ryuuki’s is now mine. Kikiou’s. Say it.”

“It used to be Ryuuki’s. Now it is yours—Kikiou’s—”

The Demon Princess shook her ass, recklessly intoxicated by the masochistic words. Her joy cried out from the deep dark pit. The higher her pride, the greater her joy in her groveling humiliation.

Blood dripped from the bite wound. Kikiou sucked it up. “I’ll give you blood like you asked. But your own.”

He swiped his hand across her hip, leaving a streak of bright red across the soft, white skin. And then painted more on top of that, adding fresh blood in sticky layers. Kikiou’s lusts knew no end. He varnished her flesh with her own blood and licked it. The gore coated his lips and face.

The beautiful princess gasped and panted. She reached back and took his hand and smeared the blood across her sides and breasts. Her own blood. She sucked on his fingers, the bloodstained fingers, drenching her mouth and teeth with red.

She howled like a wolf. Her gleaming fangs sprang into her mouth. She turned and sank those fangs into her own shoulder.

At the same time, Kikiou came.

No matter how decrepit the old man lying on top of her, the woman's pussy never ceased craving for the young man inside.

"Good job there, Kikiou," Princess said several minutes later, in tones that could freeze fire.

Kikiou had already thrown on his robe and prostrated himself on the floor. "Please forgive me."

"Didn't you say you would accept any punishment I doled out?" Now she spoke in high spirits, kneading her breasts as she spoke. Pressing against the peaks of the aroused flesh, they strangely seemed to take on a life of their own.

"I understand."

"In that case, kill yourself."

"Huh?"

His neck bent further to the floor—because Princess was stepping on it. "How does that feel?"

"Most pleasing, Princess."

"Naturally. How about this?"

The vertebrae in his neck creaked ominously. Her slender foot crushed his steel spine. His head bent at right angles. Whether or not his spine contained a spinal column, exquisite pain showed on his features.

The top half of his body drooped off the edge of the bed. Princess grabbed him by his beard. A popping sound like the snapping of tendons. Kikiou's head tore away from his shoulders.

A substance like vanilla pudding gushed from his mouth. The precious bodily fluids that sustained his life. His teeth chattered like a dime store skeleton's. A translucent lump fell to the floor and clattered in all directions.

"Does it sting? I imagine it does. I'll give Setsura Aki a gander at the face of history's most brilliant alchemist."

She came to her feet. Setsura was still standing there where she'd left him. She thrust the grotesque head in front of his face. The eyes in the decapitated head

rolled in their sockets as it finally fainted from the pain and humiliation.

“Hoh. You unfortunate man. I deliver to you such a fate, and you still want to be fucked by me. Oh, but not just you. All men. Emperor Jie and Emperor Zhou were the same. How about you?”

She brushed her finger across Setsura’s mouth.

“You who stirs my most murderous instincts. For now I will do nothing. I’ll have no peace of mind until you prostrate yourself before me of your own free will. I love a resolute man. I love a strong man. I love a handsome man. And when they grovel at my feet—ah, that is Shangri-La for me. Unlike Kikiou, who tried to conceal us from history, I sought men out. They were all the same. This mundane world can’t be expected to give birth to the extraordinary. But I didn’t give up. Every now and then, I met a man worth desiring, like the men of old. Can you hear me, Setsura? Until I came to this city, I considered setting forth to other climes, to find an undiscovered country that gave rise to rugged men who smelled of earth and sweat. But I’ve changed my mind—ever since that night, when I saw a beautiful man on the side of the road looking back at us. And moreover, that man spurned my advances while lying on his back and not moving an inch.”

She ran her fingers along Setsura’s lips.

“I shall be going out for a spell, to find a little something to seal the deal between us. You will be an inmate in my penitentiary forever.”

In the face of this frightening declaration, Setsura remained as impassive as ever. The Demon Princess was here. Kikiou was here. Magical beasts were here. Did Setsura intend to take on a world such as this all by himself?

The engineer in the white lab coat turned from the control panel and faced his visitors. “I haven’t got the slightest idea.”

Mayor Kajiwara, Galeen Nuvenberg in her wheelchair, the deputy police chief, the doll girl and the raven perched on her shoulder. They were in an underground hazardous materials storage facility in the Wakaba district. They had just witnessed the latest attempt to destroy General Bey’s casket.

“We’ve tried plastic explosives, thermite reactions, chemical incendiaries,

lasers and hypersonic drills. Nothing works. What the hell is that thing made of?"

"Ordinary wood," Galeen Nuvenberg answered in a thin voice. "However, it is covered with a special kind of varnish. It is only a millimeter thick but is impervious to all known armaments. I don't imagine even a nuclear blast would leave a scar."

Mayor Kajiwara asked, his face pale, "Are there any options left to us, Miss Nuvenberg?"

"Still making a sick old lady work?" She glanced up at the shrewd ward mayor, but there was no strength left in her eyes.

He was about to reply when he felt a strong jerk on his arm and found himself peering down at a tiny, enraged face.

The doll girl stated in an intimidating tone of voice, "I will not allow putting Grandma through any more of this! Do you have any idea how much energy it required simply transporting that casket here? Not to mention that opening the general's casket itself is an act of madness. The next stupid thing that comes out of your mouth, I will turn your heart to lead."

"My, my. Hold off on the fireworks, Miss."

Kajiwara was honestly flustered. Transporting the casket here, and the strange trio of the old witch, the doll girl and the raven had really made an impression on him.

When Nuvenberg had spoken the incantation, a silver beam of light spilled from the palm of her hand onto the ground. It was surprising enough to imagine that this substance was the same as Setsura's wire entwined around the casket. But all the more amazing was that the raven picked it up—that which could cut through heavy chains like butter—in its beak and brought it to the doll girl, who held it in her bare hands.

And that wasn't the half of it. The bird and the doll girl wrapped the casket and fastened the end by the same means, and then held on all the way to the government offices heliport.

"What I mean is, if Miss Nuvenberg cannot open the casket, then we have set

an impossible goal for ourselves.” Kajiwara folded his arms and closed his eyes. “I understand. We should count ourselves equally lucky that what is inside cannot get out. As mayor, taking the safety and security of the ward and its residents as my first priority, this casket shall be buried in a stressed concrete and steel vault a thousand feet down. Would that meet with your approval?”

“No!” the doll girl cried out.

“What is your objection this time, Miss?”

“A human girl is still inside.”

“I had heard as much. However, I have also heard about the man she is imprisoned with. This decision cuts me to the core, but it is one I must make.”

The mayor spoke like an experienced veteran admonishing a young upstart. The doll girl’s retort was cut short when the mayor suddenly toppled over.

Chapter Three

The deputy police chief rushed to his side. “Mr. Mayor! What’s wrong?”

And then like a marionette whose strings had been cut, he too slumped to the ground.

“Grandma!”

The doll girl whirled around to see the old witch slump over against the right armrest of the wheelchair. Her right arm hung limply by her side.

The doll girl sniffed at the air. “Sleeping gas.”

“Precisely,” agreed the big raven, alighting on the back of an armchair. The white-clad engineer was lying on the floor as well. “Who did this and why? And in Demon City’s Hazmat storage vaults? The nerve!”

“You’d better follow suit,” the doll girl said.

“But—”

“You understand why?”

“Yeah.”

“Then get to it.”

“Sure thing.” The raven fell to the ground like a ball of black cloth.

As the colorless, odorless gas filled the room, the doll girl alone faced the formless invader.

According to standard protocols, the Hazmat facilities were located in an underground chamber. The great majority of the hazardous materials and substances purchased, manufactured and traded by the residents of Demon City could definitely not be stored above ground.

On the second floor of an old wooden apartment building near Nakai Station, a

kid with a persecution complex and threadbare anarchist's technical manual had slapped together a suitcase-sized atomic device from plutonium 239 and uranium 238. If the timer had worked correctly, the entire city would have been reduced to ashes in an instant.

The head priest at the Shinto temple in the Daikyo district founded a strange new sect. The "god" they worshipped had been assembled from blood-sucking mites bioengineered by a biotechnologist friend of his. While drinking the blood of the suppliants, a freak mutation endowed it with free will. After eating the priest it proceeded to rampage around the city.

An unwary homebuyer bought a house from an ill-tempered real estate broker that was actually the gathering spot of malevolent spirits. After half a year, suffering not only a transformation of his spirit but his physical body as well, he attacked his next-door neighbor, who quarantined him and had him arrested. Because his next-door neighbor turned out to be a full-fledged witch.

And now they all were sleeping deep underground—frozen in suspended animation, bound by spells and charms, or kept in chemically-induced comas.

The Shinjuku police Hazmat containment facility was actually a high-risk danger zone that had once been a secret nuclear disposal site. Visitors had to pass through three security checkpoints that checked their blood proteins, fingerprints, and confirmed a spectrum analysis of their personal aura. And all conducted by cyborg security guards, no questions asked.

Every level and every wing was monitored by CCTV and protected by autonomous laser cannons and pencil missiles, with battle androids on standby. There was no other way of getting to the special storage vaults six hundred feet down.

The doll girl turned toward the door. The vault doors—that would put Fort Knox to shame—locked from the inside.

The doll girl's ears detected a short pulse. Her eardrums had highly sensitive crystal cores. The pulse was an electrical signal. It was undoing the lock.

The pulse rapidly shortened in frequency, synchronizing with the electrical circuitry of the lock. And snapped. The electronic sound trailing off didn't come from the original pulse.

The doll girl realized that the lock had already been breached when they'd gathered there. The invaders had devices that could bypass the security mechanisms of the Shinjuku police.

The door began to slide open to the right. Khaki shadows eased into the room like dark stains. The shadows changed into soldiers wearing hoods and night goggles the same color. Three of them. They weren't wearing gas masks, so they probably preferred using a detoxicant to delayed-action.

"Perfect," said Lieutenant Matthews. "Top-secret shit, that. Do it, Cardinal."

Two black men had come in behind him. The one with a willow-leaf shaped scar on the side of his neck nodded, and opened the valve to the canister on his right hip.

The Office of Munitions Control in the Defense Ministry had among its "tools of the trade" espers and biological weapons. The latter included a gaseous life form that could only be detected with specially-designed infrared sensors. Diffused into the air, it was inhaled or absorbed through the skin, with the same effect as anesthetic gas.

Not only were these tenacious buggers, capable of withstanding repeated activation, but its characteristics could be manipulated by a specific frequency of electromagnetic waves. As long as an airborne vector existed, no matter how solidly-built the fortifications, nothing could stand in its way. Not even an airtight building was impervious.

Two years before, the possibilities of also imbuing the life form with toxic properties were openly discussed in an exposé by an enterprising journalist. The product was "officially" eradicated from the stockpiles, though the foreign legion of the SDF was said to still use it with impunity.

"Kazikli Bey's casket," Matthews said in English. He was obviously impressed. He must have been aware of his connection to the great vampire of legends. "I was expecting the usual lineup of punks and wise guys. But I should have known. This is Demon City. No harm in sending this bunch of badasses to hell."

The commando next to the door finished fiddling with the silver cylinder. "The device is ready to go."

The casual sound of his voice betrayed no concern about its actual capabilities. They clearly had a good idea about the casket's characteristics, and the fruitless efforts so far to open it.

An hour after communications from his three subordinates in Chuo Park ceased, Lieutenant Matthews had written them off as dead. He didn't send in reinforcements. Including himself, six Special Forces Operational Detachment F soldiers had come to Shinjuku. It barely took a snap of the fingers to consign a sizable number of vampires to oblivion, and they had lost half their number in the process just as quickly.

The miracle was that the losses were as low as they were. They had reserves waiting outside the city. But Matthews wasn't about to admit he couldn't handle the situation with the resources he had on hand. That was the difference between an ordinary military organization and the "hired help."

Matthews quickly concluded that pulling off this job with three remaining soldiers required piggybacking on the mayor's movements.

He'd already arranged his players on the field. First, during his "meeting" with Mayor Kajiwara at the Ward Government Offices, he'd planted a bug in his pocket. The call from Galeen Nuvenberg, the conversation inside the helicopter —all came through loud and clear.

The mayor and Nuvenberg already knew everything they needed to know, and had nothing more to add to the details about the four vampires forwarded by the telepath. But he did get that they were transporting the casket of the chief instigator this time around, General Bey himself.

And also that Nuvenberg had been holed up at the Hyatt Hotel and was attacked by a horde of vampires.

Shinjuku was succumbing to the vampire menace faster than they had expected.

Matthews and his men had been called in first because of the impossible nature of the mission, and second because with vampires like Kazikli Bey on the loose, those four couldn't be left to their own devices.

Snatch Bey's casket and the enemy's brain trust would have to show itself.

Hiding it away, deep underground in cold storage simply wouldn't do.

At the same time, they'd no doubt be riling up Demon City's department of public safety. Luckily, the only people in the know about this particular casket were the mayor and Nuvenberg. If seizing the casket and obliterating the evidence meant Special Forces Operational Detachment F showing its own hand, at least that would buy them time to complete their mission.

That's where the nuclear device came in.

"Meighan," ordered Matthews. "Let's move the casket."

"Yes, sir."

Having armed the warhead, he took from the same carrying case an eight-inch metal tube and vise assembly. It had the shape of an elongated oval about three inches thick.

Meighan adjusted the electromagnetic frequency on his goggles as he approached the casket. Setsura Aki's devil wires were invisible to the naked eye, making a scientific assist necessary. Numerous rays of light danced around the casket.

"Okay. I can make it work."

He was convincing himself as much as reporting the facts. He aligned the teeth of the vise with the top center of the casket and tightened them. They slipped off. Meighan touched a lever. A brown liquid flowed out from between the teeth. It looked a lot like grease. It coated the teeth halfway up and then stopped on its own and quickly hardened.

After three seconds, Meighan jogged the vise. It didn't move.

Matthews and Cardinal gave him a thumbs up. Meighan moved the next piece of equipment into position on the opposite side of the casket. Confirming that it too was firmly affixed, he took several steps back and manipulated a rectangular control panel attached to his upper arm.

The four-inch panel could expand to as many as thirty "leafs," with each controlling up to ten devices. When it came to anything mechanical, Meighan was a remote control genius.

The vise and the connecting linkage rose up, accompanied by the ratcheting sound of a revolving turret. The downward-facing pedestal gouged a round, black crater in the floor as blue-white flame erupted into the air. The vertical thrust—far greater than the slight appearance of the device suggested—came from two groups of rocket nozzles.

Based on the engine's capacity, the engine must use a particularly high-pressure, high-density fuel.

Kazikli Bey's casket was moving, slowly but surely, though without leaving the ground.

Meighan guided the concise and convenient transport jets without any signs of undue concern.

"Set the bomb to go off in ten minutes. Once we're out of here, we'll escape by air. Thankfully it's night. We should get away unseen."

Cardinal bent over the bomb as the two others headed for the door. The casket followed behind them like one of those prop spaceships in an old science fiction movie from the 1950s.

"Son of a bitch!"

The muffled cry made Matthews turn around. Crouched on one knee in front of the bomb, reaching out for the timer, Cardinal wrapped his left hand around his right wrist. A strand of light glimmered between the fingers of his left hand. A strand of golden hair. It took a moment for the facts to register. Then Matthews and Cardinal whirled around to see the golden-haired doll girl standing in the far corner of the room.

The deep blue of her eyes and the purple of her dress reflected in the eyes of these angels of death. Matthews put two and two together. While monitoring the mayor, references to a "doll girl" had occasionally come up. The voice of what sounded like a young woman seemed to fit the description. He'd thought it a pet name for the mayor's mistress and thought nothing of it. Until now.

This flash of insight came and went. Matthews raised his right hand. The ruby light struck the doll girl in the chest with the big-bore laser gun strapped to his forearm. The barrel of a large flashlight was half the normal bore. The power

was incredible.

White smoke burst from the wall behind the doll girl. A yard-wide, yard-deep crater appeared behind her.

Alarm signals went off somewhere in his head. The target had suddenly disappeared and was now over his head. Five years before, he'd had his nervous system implanted with electronic amplifiers. A kind of electronic "sixth sense" that provided a premonition of danger was a lucky side benefit.

He didn't have time to aim as he swung his fists around.

Even for the doll girl, it was a powerful blow. Switching her posture mid-flight to parry the move, the impact broke both her arms down to the elbows. The purple body flew back violently through the air and struck the concrete wall. A thin fissure ran down her face.

Small spasms racked the doll girl's body as Matthews fired up the laser. But the beam went nowhere. An error warning light flashed on his upper body. The digital code indicated that the impact had cracked a focusing lens.

"Shit!" he growled beneath his breath. He signaled to the other two to get going.

They passed through the door with the casket, Matthews following up the rear. He felt a small, sharp pain in his hip. It didn't feel lethal, something to leave until later. Nothing so serious the macromolecular compounds in his skin and muscles couldn't handle it.

The pain became real, sinking from his hip into his guts. It was like getting stabbed with a red-hot poker. He groaned and stumbled forward. He reached out with his left hand, supporting his weight against the door frame. His right hand searched his side and pulled out the offending weapon.

The sound of an electric motor traveled from left to right. He blankly stared at the door separating himself and the hall. His left wrist was pressed against the door switch.

His fingers clawed at the wall. He summoned all his strength to return his hand to the position of the switch. Something like a branding iron penetrated his solar plexus. With a gasp, he slid to the floor.

A second strand of that hair.

Matthews bent over. A powerful sense of loathing eclipsed the pain. That doll was there in his sights. She sat up and stretched out her hands. Recalling the physical response that told him he'd shattered her arms, he had to wonder how she did it.

"I underestimated you, babe."

The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile. A friendly smile, even.

The doll's arms dropped to the floor. Her head twisted around and her upper body slowly slumped sideways. Her right cheek struck the floor with a hard, sad sound.

Matthews pulled the Colt M1911 .45 from his belt. Fifty years had passed since it'd been the standard-issue side arm for the U.S. military. A round was already chambered. He snapped off the safety and looked down the sights at the doll girl. There was not a glimmer of hatred in his eyes now.

The gun roared. The recoil made the muzzle jump. A small hole appeared in the doll girl's abdomen. The second shot was in the center of her forehead.

"Sorry about that, Miss." The Colt still leveled, he tossed her a kiss. And got no response.

But it was his left hand that came to the rescue. Touching the tube on his left hip, the sensors commenced rescue operations. The tube split lengthwise. A sparking curtain of silver leaf foil enveloped him like a cloud of smoke.

He quickly assumed the appearance of one of those old Egyptian mummies. Or a refrigeration unit for freezing bodies in suspended animation.

The electromagnetic propulsion system on the bottom positioned it so that it leaned slightly backwards and hovered a yard above the ground.

The pencil missile enclosed inside the silver foil armor jutted outwards. The firing mechanism and interlocking control systems calculated a critical safety perimeter at fifteen feet and fired only upon reaching that limit.



More than the burst of sparks, the shock wave showered the people in the room, striking the ceiling and walls and whirling about like a mini-cyclone. The door had taken the brunt of the blast, and now the silver pod glided quietly through the gash in the door.

The ultra-thin foil had the armor-bearing properties to withstand an anti-tank round, and enough shielding to protect the person inside from fatal doses of heat, radiation and cold. This air/sea/land mobile “handheld armored personnel carrier” was the latest development from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

When the lumpy mummy disappeared down the hallway, a black pair of wings rose from the floor and followed it.

The raven paused at the door and looked back. The remains of the doll girl were lying against the wall, its eyes shut. A peaceful expression on its face. Nobody aside from the raven could have imagined the cherubic girl’s struggle to the death. The bird cawed—perhaps sadly, perhaps angrily, perhaps a call to revenge.

Then, still in the air, it lowered its head and plucked up the nuclear device in its beak. However impossible it might appear, the raven swallowed it down in a single gulp.

Then with a wide sweep of its wings, it flew down the hallway.

Part Nine: Noctumancer

Chapter One

Strange things were afoot that night at Mephisto Hospital. Doctor Mephisto appeared for evening rounds. Nothing strange about that. The hospital director was wont to show up in a hospital room at all hours of the day or night without warning, and after inquiring about the patient's physical and mental condition, leave as stealthily as he had arrived.

In the majority of cases, he didn't even bother with an examination or prescribe any drugs. He rarely sat around and chatted. There were plenty of other doctors and nurses who could fill that function. Simply opening the door and glancing at the patient was often enough.

The unmistakable power of that compelling countenance was well known. The faith that came from simply being in his presence—the faith that he was *the* Doctor Mephisto—out of this profound sense of relief was born miracles.

Four years before, the chief of the United Nations Medical Service, Professor Herman Bachuras, had examined a Hollywood actress admitted the same day. He confirmed that she was being consumed by end-stage cancerous tumors in the shapes of human faces. It was all Professor Bachuras could do to keep his wits about him.

Not only was this famous actress covered with the tumors from head to toe, but her internal organs displayed the same characteristics. The carbuncles showed the faces of men and women alike, one crying, another laughing, others deriding the professor and the other doctors.

Afterwards, he wrote the following in the case notes:

> The chorus of these strange tumors—weeping, smiling, deriding, lecturing, and thousands more mixed in with them—was enough to drown out a volcanic eruption and shake the earth with its bootless cries. This

woman, praised as one of the most beautiful women on earth, had the unsightly population of a psychiatric hospital arrayed across her flesh.

That alone would be enough to drive the sanest man mad, but their voices as well resonated from her body. Not to mention that they nested like vermin among this angel's internal organs.

What held me back from the edge of madness were her eyes, clinging to me as if to a lifeline. There alone those demons did not dwell. In the face of the pure spirit of this heartrending young star—who could not release her own grasp on sanity but only plead for an impossible cure—I was tempted to flee to the safe embrace of madness. The one thing I could not do.

If the means eluded me and time became only a constant reminder of my powerlessness and failure, I had no choice but to continue to watch over her. The doctor's duty is not only to the patient's body, but also to her soul.

And then the miracle walked through the door.

The nurse said that the hospital director was coming, so I told the patient I would be right back and headed to the door. He was standing there. Doctor Mephisto held out his hand. I can't actually recall if I shook it, only introducing myself.

The director was exceedingly handsome. I don't know of better words to describe him, except that whatever those words might be, they surely couldn't be applied to any other person—or thing.

Even what happened after this was like a summer squall compared to the hurricane of emotions I felt. No other phenomenon comes close. As I was interested in getting a second opinion on my patient's condition, I stepped aside and allowed the director to examine her.

Professor Patricia Mayhew, the doctor who was with me, exclaimed in a startled voice, drawing my attention back to the bed. I witnessed it with my own two eyes. I would wager my social standing and pride as a doctor on what I saw next.

The tumors were shrinking. Each one—with a rather disgusting,

intoxicated expression frozen on its “face”—shrank and finally disappeared, melting into her skin. The last one was gone at 11:38:20 in the morning. Exactly two minutes had passed since Professor Mayhew first drew my attention to it.

She stood there dumbstruck, as did I. Only the nurses and hospital director retained their composure. The patient was crying tears of joy. God had performed a miracle. That’s what I believed. I had seen a bona fide miracle. But I also knew who had brought it about and how.

Doctor Mephisto and that breathtaking countenance. This is what real beauty could do. Nothing and no one else would ever be equally deserving of the word—miraculous.

Mephisto had rounds that evening as well.

Like a ship passing in the night, after a glimpse of his unworldly visage, he left them with a smile. The perplexed patients watched him leave. But were their eyes not so much filled with an abiding faith as colored by fear?

One of them spoke to the nurse who’d accompanied him. He should have been sound asleep. With wide eyes he said, “He’s scary—the doctor tonight—so scary —”

The nurse nodded. “Yes—he is—I feel it too—”

It was close to midnight when Mephisto contacted the head nurse at the surgical nurse’s station.

“This is Mephisto,” said the voice over the intercom. Everybody at the nurse’s station froze in place. “I’ll be leaving for now. We’re running short of raw materials for the pharmaceuticals. Have any visitors call tomorrow.”

“I understand, sir.” It was hardly unusual for the hospital director to receive visitors at all hours of the day and night. “However—” Her words stuck in her throat. The smiling nurses all paled a little. Questioning the director’s directions was simply not done. “However, the raw materials for the medicinal compounds are kept in the Resurrection Room.”

“And we are running short of them. Well then, I shall leave the rest in your

capable hands.”

“Yes.”

He hung up. The head nurse went to switch off the intercom. The switch was hard to the touch and stiff. It didn’t want to move. She pushed on it in a daze, praying that the expression on her face did not betray her state of mind.

It clicked off. A wave of relief washed through the nurse’s station, followed by light laughter.

Nobody talked about the director. Not intentionally. Their brain cells simply let the subject go.

The head nurse had the sudden impulse to offer up her prayers at the chapel that was surely in the hospital somewhere.

The citizens of the city hadn’t decided whether night or day was more suited to the owner of the *senbei* shop in West Shinjuku.

A splash of sunlight or a sea of moonlight—both made for a fine fit.

But there was no argument when it came to Doctor Mephisto. For this person, it was all night. The dead of night.

His pure white cape—that all but dissolved in sunlight—breathed in the moonlight and flung it back in dazzling blue shards that sparkled and metamorphosed and drifted on the night breeze.

Even his shadow on the asphalt was beautiful.

He stopped in his tracks and looked up at the windows of a building. A spot of loathing glowed on the dark and vacant outlines of the tenth floor. The gaze of a fallen woman who loved only him. The woman who had known beauty flew from the roof.

At the very least, revenging all that loathing and love on the street in front of him.

It happened in the Wakamatsu District.

Here on a street corner in the Wakamatsu District, visitors from far away were greeted by the sounds of the season. The festival orchestra played and the people

bustled about.

While Shinjuku had its own share of citywide festivals and anniversaries, the residents in their individual districts chose the nights for their own unique functions and events.

One was Wakamatsu's "Midnight Festival." And that was where Doctor Mephisto was headed. But what was the fearsome Mephisto after?

From behind him came the sound of an engine. A two-ton truck passed by him just skirting the speed limit. The bed was covered with a tarp. What drew Mephisto's eyes to it was a small voice in the sky above some distance away. A bird's call, it sounded like.

Two blocks on, the truck's rear blinker signaled a left turn. The white-clad doctor mused to himself, "A truck chased by a big raven. What manner of poet must they be bearing?"

Three minutes later, the truck slipped into a parking garage adjacent to an abandoned apartment complex. It stopped, and a black man wearing a windbreaker jumped down from the bed. He nodded to the driver coming out of the cab and scanned their immediate environment.

"Place looks secure, Lieutenant," he said.

With a faint mechanical sound, a silver pod appeared from beneath the tarp. It slanted downward and steadied itself eighteen inches or so above the ground. This was the "handheld armored personnel carrier."

The hideout for these three members of Special Forces Operational Detachment F was located within shouting distance of the ward government buildings and Mephisto Hospital.

Matthews said from inside the pod, "Get the casket out of the back." Despite the gravity of his injuries, he spoke in normal tones. "Take it to the back corner on the right. I don't think it'll be necessary, but things could get dicey. Better have incendiaries handy."

"Yes, sir," said Meighan, at the back of the truck.

Kazikli Bey's casket emerged from beneath the tarp. Guided by the blaze from

the rockets, it was secured in a dim corner of the structure.

"Good," said the pod. "Now comes the waiting."

"But is the head honcho of these vampires going to show up?" asked Cardinal, sweeping their surroundings with a cell phone-sized 3D radar. "It's going to take a while for news of our little heist to get out."

"You two apparently were in on the briefing, but this guy's a bigger bigshot than you can imagine. Not one of the run-of-the-mill vampires. A huge source of power. They will definitely come to save him. Vampires are very sensitive about anything bad happening to one of their kind."

"If they even know what's happening to one of their kind."

"Shall we clue them in?"

"Eh?"

A beam of blue light erupted from the front of the pod. The stream of plasma from the particle beam weapon—that could perforate high-tensile steel—melted the ground and walls and wrapped the casket in a bright glare of light, turning night into day.

The darkness inexplicably deepened. The hot air shimmered like a mirage. And inside the mirage, the casket hovered like a phantom. Meighan looked on dubiously. It wasn't that he expected the particle beam weapon to fail—destroying the casket here and now wasn't what Matthews was after.

"Are you awake in there, General?" the pod asked in Romanian.

To Meighan, who'd been in covert ops in Bucharest, the lieutenant's command of the language was halting but comprehensible.

The casket answered. Meighan felt a shock run through him. The voice seemed to erupt out of the ground in a low, long rumble. But it was definitely from the casket.

"I am awake. Ever since that damnable sun set."

"Do you want to get out of there?"

"I have given thought to what would happen in that case. Hoh—so your men

do not share the same loyalties as Setsura Aki? A man who can speak the language of my country."

"That is true. Our interests are national in orientation."

"Hoh, *national* interests," the voice from the casket responded scornfully.

A floating pod and a casket conversing with each other in a dark parking garage—exactly the kind of scene expected from Demon City.

"And why are you here?" the casket asked.

"I would like you to summon your master. I have a proposition to discuss."

"My master?" The casket's voice lowered half an octave.

"Yes. Very much a discussion worth your while. As a representative of my nation's interests, I can promise you that it will prove in the interests of General Kazikli Bey as well."

"My master?" came the question again.

"Yes. Whoever brought you out of the earth. The reason you have now made your presence known."

"You ask after my master, but can you open this casket? I would like to see you remove Setsura Aki's wires first."

The pod fell silent. Not even the particle beam could sever them.

"You cannot? You cannot do even that, and yet you demand an audience with my master? Hoh! What a worthless era this is, that put such worthless human capital into circulation. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The pod was stymied for an answer to such derision. The sound from inside the casket suddenly changed.

"What's that? Are you being summoned?"

A hollow thump, and then the sound of fingernails scratching wood. Bey wasn't alone in there. Matthews didn't know who it was, except that the sound went on and on—

Scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch—

The only change, the three outside the casket realized, was when the scratcher lost a nail. But like a dead man buried alive and coming to life in the grave, the assault on the inside of the casket continued.

Scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch—

Who wanted out so badly? Who beckoned so relentlessly? Entranced by this entirely different kind of demonic compulsion, these soldiers of shock and awe found themselves unconsciously looking around the dark parking garage for its source.

"Lieutenant!" barked out Cardinal.

"What?"

"Somebody—no, *something*—is approaching from the west."

Cardinal stared at the compact radar scanner strapped to his wrist. Along with the standard timers, GPS and map displays, it contained a laser communicator, air pressure indicator, and weapons rangefinder.

"Definitely," responded the pod, which must've been similarly equipped. The Cardinal and Meighan turned toward the entrance to the parking garage.

"Distance: eighty. Coming straight at us. I don't detect any body armor. That's a shitload of confidence. The master?"

The only response from the casket was: *Scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch scritch—*

"Meighan, Cardinal. Take cover. Get ready to take independent action. But don't shoot until I give the word."

"Yes, sir."

The two silhouettes split to the right and left and melted into the darkness.

"Fifty—four-five—coming in fast."

The caw of a crow came from the high night sky.

As if in personal defiance of these terrors of the night, as this visitor from parts

unknown set down on the quadrangle in front of it, the front of the pod glowed with a blue light.

Chapter Two

Setsura was lying on a bed. The bed of the Demon Princess. He slept. And if sleep could preserve these striking features, then he should sleep forever. An indigo glow surrounded his countenance. An onlooker might even believe that his body itself was the source of the light.

This was not a true sleep. He had been entranced by Princess's eyes and so was compelled to slumber.

Would the "normal" Setsura have surrendered so shamelessly? Ryuuki's demon *qi* was still dammed up in his gut. He had not completely recovered from the wound in his chest left by Princess's dagger. No one could hold him at fault.

Not to mention that he'd just exhausted himself fighting his once friend and ally, Yakou.

Even if coerced, sleep may have been the preferable option at this juncture.

A small noise sounded in this eternally silent space. Once—twice—a polite knock.

Setsura didn't move.

The knocking ceased. A minute passed.

"Aki-san?"

A woman's voice. Had Setsura even an ounce of consciousness left in him, he would have recognized it as that of Takako.

"Aki-san—Setsura-san—"

It was Takako's voice.

At that moment, Takako was in a casket with General Bey, and General Bey's casket was in the corner of the parking garage of an abandoned apartment

building in Wakamatsu. She couldn't be here too. And yet her voice called out to him, achingly, endearingly.

"Help me, Aki-san—Save me—"

Her thin voice flowed around the door like water and to Setsura's ears. A heartbreaking plea. Setsura's eyes fluttered. He wasn't lost in a dream. The fast sleep of his body had been stirred.

Takako's voice broke through Princess's magical powers. Setsura opened his eyes. The genie sat up on the bed.

"Princess performed as promised?"

He looked around the room and fell back on the bed. "She said she was going to find something that would convince me to take up permanent residence here—but this?"

Though under a hypnotic spell, he recalled what the Demon Princess had said.

The slender voice again called his name. He turned toward the door. "Takako-san? It can't be."

The realization that the thing Princess had gone looking for was Takako surprised even him.

"But it is."

Surprise in her voice also. And joy. Setsura shook his head and craned his neck. But it was still Takako's voice.

In the blue room, decorated with priceless antiques, Setsura Aki quietly came to his feet. He asked, "Where have you been up till now?"

"I don't know. I was taken from a room guarded by Yakou's men. When I came to, that woman brought me here—"

"And why would she do that?"

"I don't know. She left me here and departed. She released me from the web of wires you cast and told me to meet you here. The door is locked and I cannot open it. But I'm so happy that I can finally—"

The voice on the other side of the door dissolved in tears.

No matter how he looked at it, the whole thing was weird. He'd seen General Bey take her into his casket. The general said that Takako had fallen from the sky and her life had been spared. He had spirited her away to the library. It was hard to believe she could have experienced so much and remembered so little.

But Setsura couldn't categorically rule out what his ears were telling him. That Princess had gone looking for her concurred with Setsura's primary assumption, and he presumed that no one else but Princess could undo a hypnotic state she had cast.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep. During that time, it was not impossible to imagine that Princess had traveled to Shinjuku and taken the unconscious Takako from General Bey's casket. He couldn't help worrying about the fate of the doll girl and the raven who'd been watching over it.

It was unclear in any case why Takako alone would have been left outside his door. Though when it came to acting in an incomprehensible manner, Princess was one of a kind.

Questions and curiosity and the expectations of rescue pushed Setsura forward. He put his hand on the golden handle and turned it to the right.

The latch released with almost disappointing ease. The door opened. Takako was standing there in the hallway, surrounded by white light. She was wearing a pink gown that didn't altogether agree with her. It must have come from a wardrobe somewhere in the manor house.

The teeth marks on her neck were clearly visible, and while her face was pale, it did not lack for a healthy color. And no fangs protruded from her lips.

"Setsura-san—" Her lips trembled. Tears welled up in her eyes. As soon as Setsura stepped into the hallway, she clung to him, her flesh hot against his chest. "I was so scared. So scared—" she said over and over, as Setsura stroked her back.

With a relaxed but searching gaze, he examined the hallway around him. The nature of Princess's schemes remained a mystery.

"We'll be leaving soon enough, but you need to bear up for a little while longer." Takako had just begun to calm down, but now a shiver ran down her

back. “This place is that woman’s heart, so to speak. I still haven’t figured out how to deal with it all. But done right, the damage should be equal to the effort. And there’s still Kikiou around here somewhere.”

“Then what will become of me?”

“You need to be taken someplace safe.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know either,” he said. “But no matter what, the search must go on. The dangers here are extreme.”

“She will find me no matter where we go.” Takako said with an empty voice.

So why had they been thrown together in the first place?

“By the same token, I can’t very well leave you behind. That may well be her objective.”

“Then what shall we do?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Eh?”

He gently poked her in the chin with the tip of his forefinger. Without any apparent pain, Takako crumpled in his arms. Setsura flung her body over his shoulder. Having been kissed by the Demon Princess, he had to assume that Takako could not escape her awareness. She might as well be walking around with her own klieg light shining on her.

The *senbei* shop owner found himself smiling ruefully. “I do have an acquaintance somewhere around here, but he’s good and pussywhipped.”

He had no idea what Yakou was up to. As long as he was under Princess’s spell, he wouldn’t hesitate to do what he had to do when the time came. There was an aura of menace in that smile.

“Well, then—” Setsura said nonchalantly, and set off down the hall in the opposite direction he’d come. He had to find a safe place to let Takako sleep it off. After that, he could destroy this world.

He felt a presence behind him. And heard a low growl. He knew what it was.

This manor house was home to any number of strange beasts. According to the *Shan Hai Jing* and the ancient *Shen Xian* texts, these divine monsters were, like the crew of the *Flying Dutchman*, cursed to remain forever tethered to this ship's hold, never again setting foot on their native land.

Setsura proceeded undaunted. The beast would sense in him the slightest fear or undue concern and react accordingly. Regardless of whatever it was trained to do, Setsura figured that the best strategy now was to ignore it.

At the end of the corridor, a door—on which was carved the scene of a great battle—blocked his way. Setsura lightly pressed on a soldier's severed head. Light dazzled his eyes. A soft breeze brushed his cheeks and tousled his black hair.

The middle of the day?

The levels of light and shade changed, wavered, the layers upon layers mysteriously fluttering like the robes of an angel. Not exactly a metaphor. His path was blocked by sheer silk curtains blowing from the countless arches lining the corridor on either side, continuing on into the distance.

Where and how they were affixed was impossible to tell.

Depending on the strength of the wind, they trailed out like banners. Or hung wavering like drapes over a vent. Or like the hands of a playful witch, clasped across his eyes. After a few moments, Setsura said to himself, "*Curtains of Wind and Light*. So these are those."

As its elegant name suggested, Emperor You of the Chou Dynasty filled a wing of his palace with artificial light and wind and thousands of silk curtains, creating a most curious setting for hide and go seek.

"Silken Splendors," it was called. The most beautiful women in the empire were brought there and stripped naked and released within its confines. And then his retainers were let loose covered with animal skins to chase after the fleeing women and, pinning them against one surface or another, the debauchery of the Sumptuous Feast soon followed.

As Emperor You watched the spectacle in the company of his court ladies, he gave himself over to the lusts that the scene aroused.

The gossamer cloth entwined the women's bodies, revealing all their contours—their silhouettes layered seductive outlines upon the curtains—all more stimulating than raw nakedness.

After that, the retainers turned into animals in all but species. Depictions of these forbidden bestial plays were preserved in murals now hidden away in the vaults of the National Art Museum in Beijing.

The scene spreading out before Setsura suggested nothing of its once ribald nature. Only refreshing bands of light and breeze. There was no hint of any other living thing. But he could well imagine the fear born from the inextricable union between this world and the threatening presence behind him.

With a last glance back at the door, he started walking. The random dance of the curtains dazzled his sight. They were long enough to trail along the floor, so even looking down engendered a sense of vertigo. Looking up, the wind whipped at the white gauze panels.

He'd gone ten steps when the door behind him creaked. And again.

Nobody saw the flash of movement. Setsura sensed it dodging his deadly devil wire and leaping to the right. The wire pursued it.

The curtains split in half. Without a sound, the severed strands of gauze rode on the wind. The beast ran behind them, through their shadows. And seemed to disappear.

Setsura's wires shot out in all directions. The curtains shredded and fluttered in the air like confetti.

"What a bother," he muttered to himself.

Chapter Three

"Thirty," the pod said. "Twenty-five. Visual confirmation."

A white shadow floated in the gloom like frozen crystals of moonlight.

"Firing."

The red beam drew a line through the darkness. A large glowing blister rose on the back of the white shadow, the intensity of the bright crimson bleeding off toward the edges as it spread out.

The music from the festival orchestra was audible in the distance.

The beam lasted a second. The pod gave up. "Hold your positions," it said. "Stand by for orders."

The pod shook two, three times, and rebalanced itself. The instability of the magnetic levitation seemed to mirror a mounting dread of the shadow's forward progress.

The shadow transformed into a beautiful young woman with fluttering black hair, wearing a white robe. She approached the waiting SDF soldiers and their trump card.

"Freeze!" the pod commanded in Japanese. "Nobody has to get hurt. We just want to talk—" The ferocity of her comely face, half-hidden by a wave of hair, made Matthews stop talking.

The Demon Princess didn't stop. Along her path floated the pod. She struck it. Her pale hand flashed. A slender hand. The pod's armored steel could repel a 120 mm tank round.

It dented like the fender of a compact car. By a one-handed karate chop. A force of impact equal to a hundred thousand tons of force. Strain lines ran in a starburst pattern across the surface. It smacked against the ground like one of

those self-righting punching dolls.

The pencil missile launcher jammed. A stabilizer gyro and its electronics circuit board spat fire.

“God damn,” roared Matthews.

The sound of his voice hadn’t died away before the built-in computers initiated recovery protocols. The fire extinguisher activated and the repair bots shifted to the damaged components.

Princess’s body was hit from the right and left by a flurry of small arms fire.

Cardinal’s 7.62 mm automatic and 15 mm grenade launcher tore into the willowy form, engulfing her in blazing incendiary gel. Aside from the firing rate, Meighan’s 9 mm Spectre submachine gun didn’t add much more than insult to injury.

Princess raised her hands. Her white sleeves stretched out like a pair of ghostly appendages. The two were flung backwards as if by yanked from behind by a giant pair of magnets.

Her sleeves extended further, wrapping around Meighan’s neck and Cardinal’s torso and crushing both in a flash. Not sparing the death throes of the two elite soldiers a second glance, Princess flung them into the depths of the parking garage at such a velocity that they might as well have been shot from a cannon.

The impact with the concrete walls turned what was left inside their combat fatigues to jelly.

With an expression on her face that said no enemy worth considering had existed from the start, Princess turned toward General Bey’s casket.



“Ah, that scent. It must be Princess.”

“Yes. What is such a man as General Bey doing in a place like this?”

“The reason should speak for itself. As you have seen with your own two eyes, Setsura Aki is a fearsome opponent.”

“He is presently a prisoner in my manor house.”

“You managed that much? I am impressed.”

“However, an additional reward was required to induce him to join our little family. General, I have come to collect what you have there in your casket.”

“I do not agree. You were the ones who cast her aside. I have a more important role in store for her.”

“My. Aren’t you one to talk. Do you think you will be getting out of there without my assistance, General? Not likely. I am the only one in this world who can sever Setsura Aki’s threads. But be that as it may, General, what is your fascination with this girl?”

He didn’t reply.

“Does she resemble a girl you fell for once before? Of course. I heard that when the armies of your foes surrounded your mountain citadel, your wife cast herself into the ravine below. Was she a woman from the Far East?”

“Open this, Princess,” the general said in an unusually calm voice. If there was any voice in the world, the mere sound of which demanded obedience, this was it.

The Demon Princess’s right hand reached out toward the casket. The titanium wires—impervious to any other weapon—snapped like the world’s strongest guitar strings.

Princess took a step backwards.

The lid of the casket flew open. A burly finger appeared and grasped the edge of the casket. The luxuriant black silhouette of General Bey rose up. Princess’s eyes were drawn to the naked body beneath his arm. General Bey smiled at the look of uncontrolled desire that rose to her face.

“You want her? You want this girl? Depending on the circumstances, I would not necessarily be opposed to handing her over, Princess. I do owe you for keeping my head and shoulders from being permanently separated in the palace in Istanbul. What do you need her for?”

“Will you hand her over or not, General?”

“Or not. What an interesting development this is. Not only the anger in your face. You are trembling. No, glowing. Is it so embarrassing to recognize this desire for what it is? If not, then why?”

The Demon Princess stamped her feet lightly and flew over the general’s head like the white petal of a flower caught up in a whirlwind. Whether the general jumped of his own accord, or whether struck by Princess’s dainty hand—

With Takako in his arms, he leapt over the casket. Landing on the ground, he raised his right hand to his neck. Fresh blood oozed from between his fingers.

The Demon Princess would make even General Bey a target.

“It may have been your intention to sidestep that blow, but I was the one who missed on purpose. But not the next time.”

A humble declaration, not a threat. This woman had laid waste to three kingdoms in a similar manner. In the face of a will that would have left any mortal man stiff with fear, Kazikli Bey bared his teeth and laughed.

“Women are the ruin of nations, but nations never ruin them. However, just as you are now, a woman is never that great of a challenge. Princess, will you die for this girl?”

The white shadow again kicked off the ground. Even such a man as General Bey could be forgiven for having his throat cut, so transfixing was the beauty of her flight. But he hunched over instead. A silver flash of light traced an arc across the neck of the alighting Princess.

Black blood showered across her white gown.

“Hoh!”

Glimmering in the general’s hand was the knife he’d taken from Meighan’s corpse at his feet. The ten-inch, carbide-steel blade was sharpened practically

down to the atom. It could cut wire as easily as a strand of hair.

“Setsura Aki was a bit too much to ask of a man who would wield a weapon against a woman.”

Pressing a hand against her carotid artery, Princess smiled derisively. The gushing blood had already stained half of her body. Whatever her demonic qualities, surely whatever constituted her soul must be flowing out of her as well. Except that she made no other attempt to seal the wound.

“I do not want to use it against a woman, but I’ve got a bit too much on my hands.”

General Bey brought the knife up to his mouth and licked the steel with his thick, red tongue. “As I expected, this delicious wine has been aging for four thousand years. The taste is always sweet.”

“The time for playing is over.” She brushed her left hand against the wound. The blood ceased to flow. “Release her.”

Her eyes glowed red, the binding charm she used to make Setsura her prisoner. That same light burned in the general’s eyes as well. He casually tried to close his eyes, but found he could not.

The woman crossed her pale arms across her chest, forming a cross. It changed into a red hot crucifix that seared the general’s eyes.

“I am the one who saved you. I thought you might prove useful one day. But you are a loose cannon. So for five hundred years, I sealed you away in the ship’s hold. Having defied me, there is no returning to a peaceful life in my prison. Five hundred years is long enough. Well, well. The undefeatable General Bey can spend the rest of eternity in Hades wondering if he could have ever defeated me. Now, hand her over.”

Yakou and then Setsura—and now this foreign devil had fallen under the spell of the Demon Princess. The arms wrapped around Takako slowly loosened their grip. The Demon Princess’s crimson cross reflected in his eyes, as if the glowing brand were buried inside his pupils.

With a heavy thud, Takako fell to his feet. A dreamlike moan rose from her body.

“Raise the knife.” Princess’s voice was suffused with ecstatic joy. “No need to rush. The night is long. We’ll take our time exterminating your will to live little by little. Up to your fat neck. That’s it. There you go. Take your time. We’ve all the time in the world. Let’s not fuck this up.”

The General’s outlines suddenly grew dim. He was shaking, trying to push back his own hand as it raised the knife, every fiber in his being rising to the effort.

And yet the blade rose inexorably.

The fire radiating from two pairs of eyes coiled around each other, tying them together. The trembling knife touched his thick throat.

“Well done, my darling. My punishment is simple. Soon it all will end.” Princess brought her hand to her own white throat in the shape of a sword. “Off with your head!”

Her hand swept sideways. As did the general’s hand—but upwards.

In that instant, incandescent heat burned through her retinas and stabbed into her brain—the fire from her own eyes reflected off the flat of the combat knife.

At the last possible second, with his last ounce of will, the general had overcome hers.

Covering her eyes with her hand, the venomous Cleopatra took a step back. The general dropped the knife and fell to his knees. His final act of resistance had exhausted his strength.

Neither of them moved. Ten seconds passed. Her arms fell to her sides. The red-hot light still erupted from her eyes. She looked at the kneeling General and smiled. She was about to walk away when she noticed—and turned around—

Takako Kanan was gone.

In those ten seconds their mutual war of magic had robbed them of their freedom, Takako must have come to her senses and made her mistake.

“What the hell—” she growled to herself like a lioness.

This turn of events left her without the need or desire to see any more of the general. Leaving him there, she left the parking garage in a whirlwind. As

Takako's sire, she ordinarily would not lack for means to find out where she was. Except that her currently flustered state was another matter.

"She's gone—"

The still of the summer night returned and the parking garage filled with the smell of death and the sound of General Bey's pained voice.

"Like a child touching a hot stove with her. That is the kind of woman four thousand years of living will get you. Ha! As many flaws as there are sands on the seashore. Has God Himself commanded that no mortal should desire my company? Fine. Knowing that woman, she will soon set out to retrieve the girl. But I shall not easily let her go."

He came to his feet. He had started toward the casket when a voice behind him said, sounding raspy as if through a microphone, "Kazikli Bey."

The pod hovered at the height of a meter, aslant, and somehow lacking in boldness. It had retreated into the shadows, out of sight, and observed their death match.

"Ah, you are still here. Do you also wish a voyage across the River Styx?" He twisted his lips and bared his fangs, expressing his irritation at discovering a witness to his own humiliation.

"I didn't stick around for that," the pod answered in becalming tones. "As you observed yourself, that woman is more than any one man can handle. But women are women. As men, I'm sure there is still much we may find we have in common."

"What are you babbling about?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that you have a weakness for crucifixes."

Bey had no comeback for this.

"According to the legends, you loathe garlic, sunlight freezes you and turns you to dust. Get staked in your sleep, and it's curtains. I'd think it'd all make living in this world a bit of a bitch, as long as you can't be guaranteed of your safety during the day."

The five-hundred-year-old general turned his piercing evil eye on the

contraption. But eventually he spat out with great irritation, “Considering your impertinent manner, do not think you will leave here alive if this provocation lacks substance.”

“So we’re finally seeing eye to eye here?” the pod said, as if speaking to a dear friend. “We’ll work out the particulars later. But if everything goes as promised, you can have your blood and your beauty sleep, and before you wake we’ll produce the devil lady and the girl too.”

“What a bother,” said Setsura Aki. With a mixture of exasperation and wry humor, he set off walking.

His plan was to escort Takako to safe quarters, but it didn’t look like that was going to happen. He could believe that Princess was just playing with him. He sensed something in the endless sea of silk curtains. Behind him. Attacking.

A hundred layers of fabric shredded into ghostly wisps. The monster vaulted over them with amazing speed and closed on him.

The air sang out. A mist of blood erupted in the air.

Turning overhead with a swiftness God never intended any of His creations to possess, it vanished into the fluttering white on the right, trailing streams of blood.

Setsura had gotten as well as he’d given. He clasped a hand to his bloody shoulder. The beast was as smart as it was ferocious and had gone for his dominant arm.

He estimated its length at almost five feet, its weight at over two hundred pounds. Aside from its speed, the approximate description of a medium-sized panther. Even with laser sights, the best hunter in the world would have difficulty drawing a bead on such an animal.

Setsura quickly closed the wound with a strand of devil wire that cauterized it at the same time. For a run of the mill infection, a booster of antibiotic “X” during his free checkup at Mephisto Hospital would suffice. It was all up to the hospital director, of course, and a patient not named Setsura Aki could expect to pay.

The wound was most likely inflicted by a claw. Luckily, the nerves were

undamaged. Setsura allowed himself to relax a tad.

He had gone for the gut and split it open. That should slow his attacker down during the next round. In time, it should prove fatal. This led him to one conclusion—the next attack would come soon, and with everything on the line.

Setsura placed his left hand on his shoulder. His fingers moved almost imperceptibly. The problem was moving unhindered by the wind and the curtains.

"Well, then—" And he set off once more, clumsily brushing the curtains aside.

He tripped as a swath of silk entwined around his ankle. Stumbling to regain his balance, he grabbed the curtain to his right. It ripped apart like tissue paper. He pitched forward.

The beast launched itself directly at him. It had the snout of a wolf. A pair of fangs in its wide-open mouth. Breathing heavily, it disappeared behind a swath of white fabric.

In the next moment it split in two, lengthwise. Blood shot into the air and flew in a mass past Setsura's face. Red roses bloomed on the curtains behind him.

The devil wires streaming from the fingertips of his left hand had attached themselves to the surface of the cloth, transforming the gauzy fabric around him into a fluttering, razor wire stockade.

And then grasping the direction of its headlong charge, at the last moment before contact turning the silvery blades outward—that was a no-brainer. But given the enemy's speed, Setsura only had time to select a single curtain.

A do or die moment.

He didn't look down at where he'd deposited Takako on the floor. But at the ceiling, buried in white silk.

"I could really use a nap," the *senbei* shop owner mumbled to himself.

"Splendid work, Setsura Aki." From somewhere among the curtains, the fabric itself seemed to cough out the words. They came from all around him, echoing off the dancing cloth. "We have met many times before, but today shall be our last. I am Kikiou."

“Oh, don’t be so shy.”

“You seem to have only enough energy left to mock your elders. No matter. All work and no play makes Setsura a dull boy. However I would love to chat, things must be squared away.”

“For one so long-lived, you’re awfully impatient,” Setsura said, rolling his shoulders. As calm and composed as ever. Though the small, stifled yawn revealed some of the tension within. This was no time to take it easy.

“That is true, too. When we came to this city, the astrological charts revealed a bright star of doom and destruction rising. And yet it also appeared that this fateful star could be shot down. That is what sealed the decision. That is what I wagered on. I did not target you from the first because I did not know who ruled that bad star. Even after arriving here. But it is too late for you to escape. Having fallen into the universe in my pocket, I will now concentrate all my skills and strategies against it, and never let it go.”

“What a bummer,” Setsura groused. “All-out war, is it?” A thought struck him and he added, “Princess won’t be happy. I get the feeling she isn’t through playing with me. She went out looking for Takako and should be home any minute.”

“What an insolent man. The very personification of that bad star. But such naked confidence is a fearful thing. Do you think that woman is your lover?”

Setsura glanced down at Takako on the floor. “I see your point.”

Now that he thought about it, Takako had appeared, a blank slate, clean out of the blue. Kikiou and his alchemy had done a splendid job, implanting exactly the right kind of memories to confuse the real with the manufactured twin.

“Even I would never deign to step back inside Princess’s bedroom without permission. Not even to rouse you from your sleep. I resorted to such desperate measures, well aware of their contrived nature. You must have noticed. You were made to sleep more suddenly than I expected. But the beast I left behind just in case proved useful. You hardly made your way here of your own will.”

“Now that you mention it, it did feel strange—the compelling impulse to come here. Was it telepathic?”

“Precisely. Beyond this room is my home country. A door will soon appear. I shall welcome you there.”

“No waiting for Princess? Going off without so much as a by-your-leave won’t sit well with her. Besides, I can’t imagine that you have my best intentions at heart. And she burns with a murderous fury that far exceeds your own. And you know what happens to people who stick their necks out.”

“Enough with this nonsense,” said Kikiou, and Setsura sensed a strange fullness in his voice. “I cannot say whether she prays for your demise or not—no, there is no doubt about *that*. I can say she desires it from the bottom of her heart. But such is the torment she inflicts on all her lovers, nursing her bad star, keeping it forever alive as her pet. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.”

Setsura was too surprised to reply at first. *Princess and him*—but he couldn’t begin to wrap his mind around the possibilities. “Um,” he began, but thought better of it. He wasn’t sure of the right thing to say in a situation like this.

“You would do well, at the very least, to give my kingdom a visit. You are here to destroy this world, are you not?” Kikiou said in the manner that a cat toys with a mouse. “Who knows? You may well discover the key.” When the curiosity rose in Setsura’s face, he added, “Willing to bite, eh? Good. In celebration of your departure, we shall dispose of any obstacles.”

A shining object threaded through the fluttering curtains. A second before striking the floor in front of Takako, it grew into a blinding glare. Setsura dove to the ground to avoid the shower of fire, hugging Takako’s double to his chest.

“What are you doing?” Kikiou chided him. “You are really that sentimental a man?”

Setsura smiled. “When she has the same body and face as a friend, I find it hard to let even a doppelganger die without a second thought.”

“She is your ball and chain then. See to it that you do not make yourself a liar by your own hands. Come.”

At the sound of his command, the endless silk waves ceased and hung there like funerary curtains. A black door appeared in the distance. Kikiou must be waiting behind it.

Setsura flung the Takako look-alike over his shoulder and set off toward the kingdom of the dead.

Part Ten: The Naked and the Deadly

Chapter One

That day, the dangerous night was darker than usual. Anybody strolling down the street must have chosen to be there. They walked bent forward, their eyes fixed on the ground in front of their feet, or falling on the necks of the occasional passer-by.

There was nothing unique about their ashen faces. When they licked their lips —for no apparent reason—the strange gleam of their fangs peeked out.

The main drags were still safe because the large number of "respectable" citizens outnumbered them. They instinctually recognized the necessity of not showing their true colors.

When the darkness stole into the side streets and back alleys, their stoops became all the more pronounced. One crawled along the ground on all fours like a spider. One hid himself inside a discarded oil drum or the burned-out shell of an automobile, waiting for a foolish man or woman to pass by, unaware of the dangers that a summer night could hold.

But nobody was that dumb. The night was fraught with peril.

The smell of blood in the air. The warning whisper of one shadow brushing against another. A chill in the shade that was different than usual.

When the sun went down people went inside their houses, turned on all the lights, locked the doors, closed the shutters and loaded their weapons. Some preferred knives and swords to guns, but they were generally thought to possess clairvoyant abilities.

The especially strong ones had particular tools. At a childcare center near the Ochiai subway station, two girls, ages seven and ten, suddenly broke the wooden legs off a chair, and with a knife from the kitchen sharpened one end of each to a point.

A salaryman living in Okubo Sanchome burst into a flower shop and demanded garlic bulbs. When they didn't have any, he continued on to a ramen shop three stores down and gobbled down a handful of cloves. And thus was able to sleep peacefully.

More and more people were wearing crosses. But on a night like this, the first rule was of survival: *Don't leave the house*.

The sound of taiko drums and whistles could be heard in the distance as a young woman stumbled along a street on the outskirts of Wakamatsu.

Dressed, she would have come across as an "intellectual" beauty. But as she was stark naked, some men passing by happily stared, while others licked their chops like ravenous wolves.

It was Takako.

During the duel between Princess and General Bey, she had passed through the gauntlet and out of their sight. Though escape had not been the conscious objective on her mind.

Her eyes blank and unfocused, the steps unsteady—and more than anything, that she made no attempt whatsoever to cover up her slender, hourglass frame, its generous breasts and curvaceous hips. The breeze brushed the bush between her tight thighs.

The citizens of this city could surmise her "true" nature with a glance at her neck. The right side of her throat sported a small set of "feminine" teeth marks. On the left, ragged gouges from what could easily be mistaken as the bite of a wild animal. From both ran lines of dried blood.

Takako was aware of none of this. Only the faintly pulsing instinct to run away. The channels of her thought were even now governed by the two who had sucked her blood. Both experiences as sweet as they were terrifying.

But what kept anyone from approaching her on the street was the smile on her lips. A faint smile. A vulgar smile. A bloodcurdling smile.

At some point, she found herself in an alleyway. At last, persons not intimidated by her or her circumstances appeared. They walked slumped forward, licking their lips.

A salaryman with a combover—a petty gangster wearing an aloha shirt—a slack-jawed shop owner—a young playboy—a bunch of housewives with shopping bags dangling from their arms—a kid in jeans—a girl with a bob haircut—

They had come together with a single desire in mind, and would not have otherwise in a million years.

They wanted blood. Wanted to suck it, drink it, lick it and swallow it. Their eyes glowed the color of the liquid they sought. Those eyes gazed upon Takako's neck. And her breasts. Her thighs and hips and ass.

Suck her anywhere and it would issue forth.

The darkness stained her surroundings like a flood of tar. The forbidden desires oozed through the gloom.

And then suddenly scattered. The slumped shadows all focused their attention on what was in front of her.

Someone was coming. *More prey*, they were about to gloat, but exchanged puzzled glances instead. *He* carried about himself the same aroma as did they.

The sleeve of one arm, embroidered with golden threads, fluttered in the wind. The stranger approached the circle around Takako. His left hand waved back and forth, as if issuing a command. As if awakening unseen forces, the creatures in human form divided right and left.

The fear and anger condensed into an eerie fog that swirled through the air. Takako alone stared back at the man approaching her with a faraway look in her eyes.

"Do you remember me?" asked General Ryuuki.

Whatever he'd been caught up in since parting with Setsura and Mephisto off the Shokuan Avenue shopping district, his moonlit mien appeared as fearless and unflappable as it ever had.

He looked closer at Takako's neck. "Princess and—these hideous scars must be the handiwork of General Bey." The pained manner in which he spoke betrayed his true feelings. "I do not know how you escaped. And you are still not

one of us. Where shall I take you then?”

To a hospital. The thought must have registered somewhere in her mind. But in her hesitation he perhaps sensed that to Takako in particular, the hospital would be the least safe place imaginable.

“Setsura’s house? Well. On the other hand, an eccentric friend of mine has a place nearby. Let’s be on our way.”

He had a gentle and sonorous voice. Though it would be clear to anybody who knew the full particulars that there was nothing safe and secure about any place Ryuuki called “home.”

From around the two of them came low growls and the grating of teeth, the discontent of male and female, old and young alike. Was this man going to just walk off with their bounty?

Unperturbed, Ryuuki glanced around the circle and mused, “The night’s ever-increasing outcasts? This is Demon City. What shall it be called after this?”

A reptile-like shadow darted about his feet. Before Ryuuki could fix his eyes on it, it had scurried over to Takako’s ankles. Then rose up and affixed itself like a giant leech against her white back. It was a seventy or eighty-year-old woman, though her spindly arms and legs exactly resembled those of a spider.

A pair of fangs glinted in the moonlight.

Ryuuki reached toward her. Takako spun around, the “spider” on her back. More than a yard of empty space separated them. But as he motioned with his hand, she turned in the direction indicated, as if prodded by an invisible pole.

The old lady—her fangs readying to strike—turned her head and looked back at Ryuuki. Something flew at her face. It swelled and then exploded into a cloud of mist that melted into the darkness.

Ryuuki’s demon *qi* was in fine working order, a supernatural skill that could be directed at the target of his choosing. And once it found its mark, no living thing on earth had ever survived an attack.

“I have not used it in a while, but it does not seem rusty. Do not make me destroy the rest of you.”

He scraped off the remains of the old woman from Takako's back. Putting his arm around her waist, they proceeded in the direction she had come. Sensing that the quiet wrath of this destroying angel was something quite apart from the norm even here, the crowd took this advice to heart.

Above their heads, a crow cawed. Ryuuki glanced up, but paid it no mind. He and Takako turned left at the first corner.

They passed by crowded lots of prefab housing and entered a desolate no man's land. The place had once housed condominiums and rental properties, until the unholy power of the Demon Quake laid them flat. The piles of brick had mostly been carted away. Ghosts and goblins now slept in the cold wasteland.

In one corner of the clearing were the lit windows of a house with an overhanging roof. It looked like an overgrown mushroom.

A rudimentary version of the simply-designed vinyl "bubble house." The inflatable, water-resistant, nonflammable polymer, reinforced with Kevlar-strength panels, could be stored in a suitcase when not in use. They'd originally been part of the first Shinjuku reconstruction efforts, provided by relief agencies to the refugees. But they'd caught on among the citizenry for long-term housing.

Confirming that they hadn't been followed, Ryuuki rang the bell next to the vinyl door.

A shadow darkened the peephole. "So you came back!" a bright voice said. The door was flung open. A young woman around twenty smiled. Seeing Takako, her eyes widened. "Who is this? Don't dawdle. Come inside."

A flurry of activity followed. After sending the dazed Takako to the shower, and putting her into a nightdress and then into a bed in the next room, she had Ryuuki fill her in on the details.

The woman's name was Hitomi Takamori. She had worked as a freelance model. Though not so much in Shinjuku anymore. Nowadays she paid the rent writing a gossip column for a local political rag.

The night before, she'd run into a one-armed man carrying a small koto.

She hadn't been able to sleep that night, so she went outside to enjoy the cool of the evening and saw him standing at the edge of the block. At first she thought

he was a thief, but found herself attracted to his resolute and solitary appearance. So she invited him in.

He'd firmly declined. She'd insisted. He gave in, with an odd proviso—that he be allowed to stay in a room that was shielded from the light of day. But not so odd to a resident of this city. He stayed holed up in the room until the following night.

He awoke at sunset, politely thanked her, and said he was going out. Hitomi felt something odd and heartrending about him. But at the time, she translated this reaction into a desire to stay close to this man, to his gallant demeanor and dignified bearing.

When Ryuuki came back with the strange girl, Hitomi wasn't interested in the circumstances. She had done her best to make him stay, but he insisted that he didn't wish to burden her. The simple fact that he'd returned filled her with a blazing joy.

She asked him about nothing more than the normal run of events. A naked woman crashing in the spare bedroom simply wasn't that unusual around here.

"She is an unfortunate girl, cursed by evil blood. I cannot compensate you for putting us up for the night. And all the more shamelessly, there is one more thing I wish to ask of you."

Hitomi nodded. "I don't mind. What is it?"

"Tomorrow morning, I would like you to take her someplace. I will give you the address. I will soon bid you farewell and do not intend to return. I will entrust the girl to you."

"No," Hitomi blurted out despite herself. "I've already agreed to take her in. But this time, I want something in return. You spend tomorrow night with me."

"That I cannot do."

"One look at her neck and anybody can tell what's up with this woman. Or with a man who doesn't wake during the daytime. But there's nothing to fear here. The vampires who live in this city are a well-mannered lot."

"The vampires that belong here, you mean."

“If not them, then who?”

“Please look after her. This is all I can do for her now.”

Ryuuki bowed his head and turned away. Hitomi reached out to him. *Wait*, she wanted to say. He stopped. Hitomi’s fingers brushed his elbow.

“What?”

But nothing emerged. She swallowed the words that came to her mouth.

“Can you hear it?” Ryuuki said.

“Hear it?”

“The sound of a raven. A raven cawing at night is a harbinger of bad luck. They say the raven is the master of ceremonies at the Devil’s Banquet.”

Hitomi was again at a loss for words.

“Besides, we have another visitor.”

Another long moment passed before she grasped what he was saying. She looked toward the door. Ryuuki’s form filled her field of view. The door opened. Gray dust swept around him. It must have been brought in by the night wind. Hitomi closed her eyes. But felt not even the flicker of a breeze.

When she curiously opened her eyes again, the darkness had swallowed him up, black into black. Hitomi was about to shut the door when she opened it up again, almost in a daze, knowing it was something she should not do.

The moon was bright that night. The surrounding vacant lots glimmered with snow-like white. The outlines of buildings in the distance appeared like crudely-cut paper silhouettes.

A man stood in the center of this vista. A beautiful man. Hitomi sensed she could even see the wind fluttering his white cape.

How did he come to be here—Doctor Mephisto?

His cheerful voice said, “How unexpected to run into each other, General Ryuuki.”

Ryuuki smiled. An unusual wry smile for the stalwart general. “And how did I come to your attention?” He craned his head skyward. “A little bird told you,

perhaps?”

“Yes. An acquaintance of sorts.”

Mephisto didn’t stir an inch. The cape concealed his hands. Spotting the raven trailing the truck that bore the casket, he must have resolved to track it down.

“Was the raven following you?”

“No. The girl inside the casket. The girl I met at Setsura Aki’s shop.”

“Yakou proved undependable. I shall hear the particulars from Kanan-san herself. You are free to go.”

Nothing disturbed the moonlight pouring down.

“What?” pressed Mephisto.

“The girl is ill. I cannot hand her over to you.”

“I am a doctor.”

“A doctor with those telltale marks in his neck,” Ryuuki said shortly. “And a raven bearing bad luck as your guide, death and deformity in your pale hands. Best you continue your midnight stroll, Doctor.”

“I have been asleep since last night. In the meantime, many strange things have occurred. General Ryuuki, why do you not return to your country?”

“I have no country to return to.”

“And yet another strange thing. We really should part ways here.”

“Princess commanded me. To kill Setsura Aki.”

“And do you have the heart to do so?” The wintry scene froze and cracked with tension. “General, why are you seeking out a place to die?”

“You shall have my answer after I have kept this girl safe until dawn.”

There was no hesitation in his reply. The white dust swirled around him like ice crystals in moonlight.

“I would rather ask the darkness.”

“Well, then,” said General Ryuuki.

“Well, then,” said Doctor Mephisto.

Chapter Two

Ryuuki moved first, the trailing dust forming a brilliant comet's trail.

Less than ten feet separated them. Mephisto's cape spread out like a white butterfly's wings and fluttered hauntingly skyward as he waved his left hand.

Ryuuki took note less of the bottle he was holding than the streams of liquid scattering from it. He jumped backwards. A black stain ran across the asphalt like an open wound.

Mephisto shouldn't have time to retreat. The one-armed man reached out his hand toward him. The colorless, odorless power poured out. The aim was true and struck the white-cloaked figure dead-on.

It hit the white cape. The demon *qi*—that had felled even Setsura Aki—bounced off as if hitting a castle wall. Except that, wrapping around him, left him with no time to retreat.

Ryuuki leapt forward, vaulting the stain on the asphalt, and landed in front of Mephisto.

The ground gave way under him. Startled, Ryuuki glanced down. He'd sunk down to his ankles. *Things* were popping out of the stony gray surface—the gray faces of men and women, old and young alike. Their mouths rose up to grasp his feet.

Faces appeared from beneath the ground

Faces of the lonely and infirmed

They appeared as if out of a fog

Truly suffused with certain sadness

So a poet had once written. It was unlikely he ever dreamt that what he

imagined would come to life. The gray, sickly faces sucking on Ryuuki's feet were not of one simple mind. A myriad of emotions played across their faces. The purple night shook with their laughter.

"My faces are less gluttons than scholars under the skin," Mephisto said, slowly lowering his cape and showing his serene countenance to the moonlight. "Nothing more than that. However, I shan't be keeping you company until dawn. They are more than willing to while the night away chatting with you."

This time Ryuuki answered the doctor's curt declaration in an unexpected fashion. "Stop, Shuuran."

The sparkling dust that had begun to flow in Mephisto's direction reversed direction.

"That is—" Mephisto started to say, and understood the reason for Ryuuki's command—with his ears.

Ryuuki reached around his back with his left hand. A sound came forth. Ryuuki turned his shoulders. His hand held a small koto. The ghost koto *Silent Night*. The quiet weapon that Mephisto had not actually seen him play.

Mephisto pointed to his ears. "Earplugs. Oh, but these faces—"

The strings sang out.

"So sad," one cried.

"I'm so sleepy," said another.

"A winter's night."

"The moon is lovely tonight."

"I really must sleep."

"So sad."

"So sad."



The notes floated in the air, playing out above the dusky faces. The faces sadly closed their eyes. Their lips slackened. Ryuuki softly stepped away and turned his eyes on Mephisto.

“My playing is not frustrated by earplugs.”

Mephisto’s closed eyelids opened barely to slits.

“The Demon Physician also should wait here until morning. Nothing would make me happier, if I do say so myself.” He again strummed *Silent Night* as he stepped past Mephisto. “You cannot lay hands on one who drank your blood. All the more so one who set me free.”

He took several more steps before the thin ring tightened icily around his neck.

“The earplugs supplied by Mephisto Hospital are not perfect. But neither are they useless ornaments. You should have played your entire repertoire, from every era, past and present.”

Ryuuki tried to look back at him. The ring tightened with a ferocious force. Ryuuki’s whole body trembled. *Silent Night* fell to his feet.

“Will you continue to live if I sever your head? A technique Setsura Aki did not try. But I shall explore the possibilities.”

At that point, Ryuuki’s head should have fallen off his shoulders. Except that Mephisto was engulfed by a gray mist that caused even the self-assured Demon Physician to hesitate for a split second. In that split second, Ryuuki caught hold of the wire around his neck.

The forces acting on this strand of silver momentarily reversed themselves. The white-caped figure soared into the air like a bird riding an updraft. As Ryuuki aimed his killer *qi* at the world’s most beautiful target, he was overcome by a fierce bout of coughing.

Though the effectiveness of his strange and ancient fighting technique was weakened, Mephisto just managed to find purchase on the ground with one hand and parry it. Ryuuki sprang forward, readying to deliver another blast of his demon *qi*. Mephisto wouldn’t have time to dodge it this time.

But instead he stared up at the sky. As did Mephisto. From far away came the

cock-a-doodle-doo of a rooster announcing the impending morn. The darkness began to brighten.

Neither of them said anything. Fighting was not the imperative now. Without a sound, Mephisto rushed off through the steel-gray mist to his secret haven.

Leaving Ryuuki behind. “Yonder is the east,” he said to himself, facing the glowing horizon. “Long, long forgotten.” It was the color of fortitude and solitude. “As long as Princess is not here, there is no reincarnation should I turn to dust. This may be the best place of all to die a nameless death.”

The gray mist around him stirred.

“Do not trouble yourself, Shuuran. The only reason I sought out this city was to find a place of repose. I have known all along—I used up my life that day at the reaches of the wastelands.”

The cock crowed again.

He stood there like a statue brimming with heroic self-denial as the world around him welcomed the new day.

The door behind Setsura closed. A strange sight unfolded before him.

The abrupt change from the luxurious splendor of the preceding room and passageways was like a clash of cymbals. The fading gloom rose to the high ceiling. Every other dimension was far more cramped. Stained paneling lined the walls and floor.

A sharp scent assaulted his nostrils, definitely the smell of blood and organic decay. About the time he noted that the shadows stuck here and there to the floorboards were drips and splotches of one sort or another, a distressed sigh issued from Setsura’s shapely mouth.

“This is my kingdom.” Kikiou’s voice radiated from above and below. “Look up.”

Setsura raised his head. Where his line of sight met the ceiling, the gloom evaporated, revealing two huge pots dangling from a thick rope. “Contained within are heaven and hell of my own making. Direct your desires. The results will surely foretell your fortune and your fate.”

Far more than the Demon Princess or Ryuuki, this voice was filled with human emotions that put an altogether greater chill into the blood.

In contrast to which, Setsura grumbled, “Red-bean soup or sake—which do you think I prefer?”

After a moment of silence, Kikiou said, “Funny man. If you do not choose, then I will. There should be no need to tell you which.”

“Is that so?” said Setsura, with a look that suggested the answer had come to him. “Soy sauce or sake—now that’d be worth mulling over.”

“Idiot.”

As if severing a connection, Kikiou’s voice disappeared.

“I suppose I’m not taking this seriously enough,” Setsura said with a smile. His presence, in fact, betrayed no sense of impending danger.

The rope creaked as the mouth of the big pot on the right—almost ten feet in diameter—tipped toward him. “Hold on a minute.” He held up a hand. “I was thinking of the other one.”

A cloudy, viscous clump jutted out from the mouth of the pot. The gray insides throbbed with breath-like pulses, proof of some sort of life. Not waiting for the mouth to come to level, the thing oozed out and spilled onto the floor.

An elliptical blob of jelly three yards long and three feet in diameter at its widest fell through the air. It struck the ground and quivered violently. With a plopping sound, the tapered end turned toward Setsura.

If the eye on the end of the stalk couldn’t see, then it must hear or smell or sense electrical or infrared waves. Vein-like ripples ran across its surface and vanished. In turn, beads of sweat appeared on Setsura’s forehead. His devil wire should have trisected the “torso” of the living jelly into three sections.

“You will never cut it with that devil wire of yours,” mocked Kikiou in high-pitched laughter. “Having fought General Bey, you must be aware of his regenerative powers. I studied him carefully during his five hundred years of confinement, and came up with *that*. There is a very primitive component unique to his family line. Historically, it was triggered by those infamous acts of

brutality. However, within those powers are substances entirely suitable to my ends. Biology teaches us that the more primitive the structure, the more powerful its properties."

Setsura gazed up at the ceiling and then down at the creepy thing creeping across the floor. "So this thing is General Bey's sibling?"

"A relative of sorts, I suppose."

"Give them four thousand years and there's no end to the weird shit people can develop a taste for. A scholar living forever might not be such a good thing."

"I would agree. But apparently it thinks that even a *senbei* shop owner deserves the privilege."

"What an honor," said Setsura, in a manner that suggested it was anything but. "In any case, what sort of powers does it have? Perhaps a few particulars before I journey to the great beyond?"

"Fine."

A large shadow dropped down in front of the blob. Even Setsura was taken aback by the unexpected appearance. It was about as long as the blob, but its shape was far more complex—and more than complex, *mysterious*. The ferocious face of a tiger, the body of a lion, the scaled legs of an alligator, the tail of a snake coiled upwards.

"A chimera, eh?" Setsura observed in a slightly bored voice.

The magical beast said to inhabit not only Ancient China but Japan as well. Unlike the fable, though, this one was quite real, Kikiou's handmade bit of man-made life.

The monster would have made the ordinary man faint dead in his tracks. It turned its face toward Setsura and growled. A sound that had once shaken the city of Chang'an. The old boards shuddered. At the sound of cracking wood, Setsura looked down and saw it was caused by falling rusty nails.

As if provoked in turn, a hissing came from the opposite end. The snake-tail rose up, flicking its flaming red tongue at the blob hugging the floor.

"Over there, over there," Setsura said under his breath.

He hardly expected such admonitions to meet with any success, but after two or three more steps, the chimera came to a halt and twisted its body around.

The room filled with a blue glow. Setsura groaned silently. He felt a fierce numbness in his face and hands. A burst of St. Elmo's fire.

He didn't have to ask where it came from. Back during the Heian Era, whenever a chimera called a *nue* appeared in the Imperial Palace, the skies clouded over and flashes of lightning rained down for miles around.

The burst was followed by an explosive slap of air. Blinding lines of blue streamed between the ceiling and the blob. The lines of light separated and scattered in all directions, and then disappeared. From the slashing lines arose coral-like coronas that trailed off in gleaming beads.

Setsura raised his arms to shield his face. He didn't feel numbness, but waves of heat. But before it could grow to an unbearable intensity, the heat abruptly dimmed. The slicker's insulated, heat-resistant threads did their job.

Disregarding the wafting white smoke, he turned his eyes on the magical beast. The chimera had plainly decided that the blob was its first order of business. Hugging the ground, muscles tensed, readying to jump like a stalking cat, it surveyed the situation.

In front of it, the blob's unceasing pulses had reached from its innards to the translucent waves on its surface. The charge of many thousands of volts must have caused changes in its inner workings. Or was this an expression of anger?

The twinkling points of lights inside it suggested not so much the product of radioactive luminescence as that of a compact nuclear reactor. The chimera's tail stood up. The balance of its emotions had apparently tipped in favor of the snake.

A third flash of electrical fire stained the world blue. Flames spurted from the coral-colored outcroppings on the floor and walls. Pierced by the bolts of lightning, the blob of jelly convulsed violently. Blue smoke shrouded the flickering radiation. It soon extinguished, leaving only a glowing point of light, as if struggling to balance the deadly surge of power.

This point of light suddenly reached out. If the creature had a "light of life,"

this was it. It entwined itself around the chimera's snout.

The chimera's alligator forefeet trembled. When the sharp claws touched it, it disappeared. But the light soon advanced. In the next moment, another ribbon of light bound the chimera's forefeet.

The chimera slumped forward onto the ground. Its fighting spirit did not slacken. This time, the sparks of electricity severed the ribbon of light. Apparently effective, the blob spit out the severed end and oozed backwards.

The chimera didn't move. It knew this was no ordinary foe.

The blob glowed. The particles of light formed a tail and grew outwards. Sensing what was coming, the chimera leapt to the side. The ribbon of light swerved and zeroed in on the creature's body. Blue flashes of light knocked it away. One beam remained.

It didn't entwine. It penetrated. The end was clearly visible inside the lion's torso. The magical beast arched its back and roared, desperately countering this otherworldly attack with its otherworldly life force and body mechanisms.

The globe of light lost its color. The magical beast's fierce face brimmed with vigor and drive. As did its roar.

Light shot toward that mouth.

It spun around with an expression that would frighten the devil. The ribbon of light was sucked into the mouth of the rearing snake tail. The light twisted down the snake's gullet and reached the middle of the creature's body.

The chimera didn't have the strength to resist this second shock of light. Its forefeet collapsed. The hind legs followed. The tiger's face still glared defiantly at the blob. But the light went out of its eyes and it slumped to the floor.

The far more gruesome scene unfolded after that.

The chimera spun around. The snake tail ejected a stream of light. In an opposite and equal reaction, the eight hundred pound beast slid effortlessly along the floor and into contact with the shivering blob.

Setsura had to wonder how it would absorb all that mass.

Exactly the opposite. With a sound like a squeezing bladder, the chimera's

body split neatly in half, from its head to its tail, and turned completely inside out, right down to its internal organs.

Chapter Three

"How old school," Setsura said to himself.

It was his turn next.

Whether the inside-out trick itself proved sufficiently satisfying, or that was the way the blob harvested a prey's energy, the living jelly withdrew its ribbons of light from the magical beast's corpse, oozed over it, and started after Setsura.

"This is certainly a bit of a pickle," Setsura observed. And in fact, at that moment his brain did feel like it was being stuffed into a pickle jar. "Is slicing and dicing going to work here?"

But cut what? The uselessness of attacking the blob was quite clear by now.

A little over a dozen feet separated them. The points of light poured out. Half that length was cut in half. The ends flew into the air.

"The light can be cut."

As if tracking the sound of Setsura's voice, the blob reached out with a dozen more gleaming lines. But Setsura nimbly vaulted past their reach, landing behind the blob.

He'd wrapped his devil wires around the ropes and beams holding up the pots and judged the range of the enemy's light at fifteen feet. In the process, his attention was drawn to the next threat waiting for him.

There was another pot.

Ropes and gears ground over his head. In front of him stood a person, her back to him. A naked woman.

"Hey, the deal was one pot," Setsura protested to the formless Kikiou. *Heaven and Hell*, the alchemist had said. The beauty of her back alone suggested heaven.

She turned around.

She was as pretty as a peony. Firm breasts like ripe fruit. A tight waist and round hips that were the crystallization of all the beauties of ancient China. And yet her charms faded like mud in front of this young man.

She licked her raw red lips. Her hands reached toward him. *Come to me*, she cried out silently. *Come into my arms. Let us sleep together.*

Her blazing allure shook Setsura's frame. The desire to rest comfortably and sleep in that embrace. It would have been improbable normally, so he knew that he was reaching the limits of his fatigue.

The woman stepped forward. Her arms were about to wrap around him when he slipped backwards.

A thin line of red from the corner of his mouth stopped her in her tracks. At the last moment before he fell under the spell of this mysterious beauty, the young *senbei* shop owner had bitten his own lip, yanking him back to reality.

He had one foot in the grave already. Together with his gray skin, his sickly but comely countenance created a mad kind of beauty. The bright red trickle from his mouth only exacerbated his otherworldly appearance.

"I've heard about you. You appeared in the city of Nanjing, embracing men one after the other, luring them into a sleep from which they never awoke. The Hugging Maid, didn't they call you? Sorry, but I'm just not that into you. That guy, though, is more your speed."

Setsura pointed to the woman's right. She turned. As if seeing the blob for the first time, she blinked.

Perhaps because she was fifteen feet away, the blob monster didn't shoot one of its ribbons of light at her. But when she stretched out her arms, its movements ceased. The Hugging Maid's powers seemed to extend beyond fifteen feet.

And worked on any kind of "partner."

The woman drew closer to the chimera killer. She leaned over and embraced it and slumped to the floor. Her breasts flattened against the blob. Her thighs straddled its mass with the practiced technique of a professional working girl.

Five seconds—ten.

The lights inside the jelly quickly lost their luster. Another five seconds and they had dimmed altogether. The blob that had slain the chimera now lay still beneath the woman's body.

"This sucks. I don't want to cut her."

As if taking note of his presence again, the Hugging Maid slowly came to her feet.

"Heaven, to be sure," he muttered. "Or rather, hell."

"Have you figured it out? No matter what manner of man, he cannot resist her charms. You are even now subject to her wily influences. First keep it up for five more minutes and then we shall talk."

"Suit yourself," said the annoyed Setsura, and cast out his devil wire.

The woman kept on coming as if nothing were amiss. Setsura now grew cognizant of the impulses of his own soul and couldn't help being a tad surprised. The wire that should have severed her head in a second—missed.

The Hugging Maid was said to have reduced Nanjing's population by a third. Her powers of seduction were a world apart from that of other monsters and demons. As she breathed upon Setsura a rainbow of death, the curious thought sprouted in his mind that he must not harm her in turn.

Originally, the Hugging Maid was, as the name suggests, a maid. She worked for a wealthy merchant's family in the outskirts of Nanjing during the Tang Dynasty.

She was a good worker, but her natural beauty and sexual appetites proved calamitous. She slept with every man, from the owner down to the randy teenage stock boy. Every woman in shouting distance loathed her, and the culmination of their anger and jealousy eventually saw her tossed down a well or buried alive—the legends didn't agree on the specifics.

The horror she visited upon Nanjing was said to be the product of her unsated desire and lust for revenge upon the women who killed her. Though that part of the story might have been scripted by Kikiou as well.

Come to me, she silently intoned.

Setsura's features grew hazy, as if shrouded in fog. His eyes filled with a strange power. A moment later, the Hugging Maid barely had time to gulp when a fresh slit opened in her neck and her head toppled off her shoulders.

"Hoh!" came Kikiou's shout.

"Oh, that reminds me." Setsura turned his head and looked at the pretend Takako. "This woman."

Perhaps the sense that he should save her had been rekindled by the Hugging Maid, though in any case, that he should save the one and calmly behead the other was yet another aspect of this young man that placed him beyond the pale.

"As this girl isn't Kanan-san, there's no reason to go on playing your games, is there? Let's destroy Princess's crypt and this world and get out of here. Right now, the former strikes me as the more pressing matter. Where is it exactly?"

"And what if I tell you? Will you leave that life behind?"

"That'd be fine with me," Setsura casually replied.

"This attitude of yours—if it is for real, then I would have to conclude you have a screw loose somewhere. You are an entirely odd man. But I grow tired of playing as well. Let us draw the curtain on this scene."

"I appreciate it. I guess it's time for the big entrance."

"Exactly. Please proceed through the door at the back."

Setsura took note that what had appeared until now as a section of the plank-covered wall, was in fact imbedded with rusty old hinges.

"What is this, a game of Twenty Questions? You sure like to drag things out, old man."

The iron door began to open before his hands touched it.

"Hey," Setsura said suspiciously.

There was a wooden staircase inside the door. It only went up, and whatever waited at the end disappeared out of view past the ceiling.

Setsura groaned. "If we're going to do this, the sooner the better. No need to be

such a drama queen about it."

He looked around, wondering if there was a button for an elevator or escalator. A silly thought, but knowing Kikiou and the scale of this place, not out of the realm of the possible.

"Well, then." Setsura lowered the pretend Takako from his shoulder. "I don't know if you'll be safe here. But here should be safer than where I'm going. It's been a short and strange relationship, but take care. You'll wake up soon."

He spoke in soothing tones. He may have hoped to say this to the real Takako.

He again directed his gaze at the staircase, and without a backwards glance began to climb the stairs. It was an interminable journey. Midway through, startled by the creak of an old plank perhaps, a number of bats brushed past Setsura's face.

"Sorry."

They resumed their flight. The creak in the boards ceased. Setsura looked up. The staircase resembled a winding thread stretching toward the sky.

He counted his steps. They ended at precisely three thousand. A door appeared in front of him. Light glowed all around him. His hair stirred in the breeze. He turned the brass latch and stepped outside.

A gust of wind caressed his cheek. He looked up. White clouds floated through the clear blue. The mountains slumbering in the distance reflected the color of the sky.

His eyes were drawn down to the crimson slope at his feet. Beyond the abrupt end of the rows of red tiles, a forest stretched out beneath him—so richly green as to be almost black—surrounding the mirror-like surface of a lake.

The heavy fatigue spread out from his abdomen. This was surely all part of the same, single world. Who could possibly eliminate all of it? The weariness of finding himself its understudy destroyer welled up again.

Setsura was on the roof of a tall tower. The black silhouette perched upon the fiery red tile was like a shard of night glowering in an eternal sunset. The scene —like an elegant landscape painting—was more akin to a battle plan before the

carnage began.

“How nice of you to come.” Like the cool wind had turned to human sound.

Setsura was standing about halfway down the sloping roof. The pinnacle of the tower rose up and to the left. The tiles ran toward him in parallel rows. The statue of a strange large bird resembling a phoenix or eagle graced its peak. A man in a trailing white beard perched there as if supported by its widespread wings.

It was Kikiou. The death match was about to begin.

For a long moment, beneath the infinite blue sky, the Hsia Dynasty’s greatest warlock and the beautiful genie stared at each other. Before a second breath could elapse, Kikiou’s mouth twisted into a small smile.

The wind roared.

“The main actor makes his appearance, eh?” Setsura said. “It’s enough to make me break out in a cold sweat.”

Taken aback by this matter-of-fact forthrightness, Kikiou smiled stiffly. Though the smile soon transformed into an evil grin. “Precisely. I will see you lying in your own grave before getting to Princess’s crypt.”

“Well, could you at least tell me one thing first?”

“What is that?”

Kikiou’s searching gaze focused on Setsura’s face. Having dressed the stage, he was undoubtedly assured of his ability to see the play through to its final deadly act. But even for him, judging the true intentions of his enemy was well-nigh impossible.

He wasn’t losing it. That was the nature of the beast. But a four-thousand-year-old warlock and alchemist could tell. The strange hues oozing like multi-colored threads from his languid eyes, from his lips, from the tips of his fingers—it was like there was a universe inside him. An omen, a bad star. And come what may, it must be extinguished here and now.

The old man brimmed with a fighting spirit redder than the red roof. He gripped his wooden staff in his right hand, ready to strike—

Setsura asked lazily, “Think of the answer as a going-away present from Hell. Where is Princess’s crypt?”

Kikiou’s blood lust wavered. It threw off his timing. For a split-second, he thought instead of acted. And quickly resolved himself.

He pointed his staff, not at Setsura’s chest, but at a point behind him and to the left. Setsura followed the line of the staff to the sky-blue water of the lake. A small island jutted out of the almost perfect circle. From this distance, its diameter looked about a hundred feet. In the center soared a stone structure that resembled a mausoleum, surrounded by a sturdy colonnade.

“There is Princess’s bedroom. Perhaps you imagine yourself holed up in her love nest. That will never happen. Unfortunately for you, Princess sleeps alone. And you will die here.”

The staff whipped around. The killer *qi* that dueled with Yakou. Blackness jumped out from the space through which flowed the colorless, odorless energy.

“Whoa, whoa—”

The voice and the killer *qi* chased each other around the rooftop. Landing and taking off and landing again. Setsura was cornered at the edge of the roof. There wasn’t anywhere else left to run to. Another step and it was thirty feet down to solid earth.

With Setsura in his grasp, Kikiou lips twisted into a malicious smile. Full of unflagging confidence and glee, he brought down the staff. A flash of light—

The roof tiles erupted. But only the tiles. Setsura fearlessly leapt to the left. He had no foothold. His fate could only be a fall to his death.

“What!” exclaimed Kikiou.

Setsura didn’t fall. He stood in mid-air, his black hair and black slicker fluttering in the wind. Kikiou had seen far greater miracles in his long life. But he stopped and fixed his eyes upon what could be mistaken for an incarnation of divine mysteries.

Given one blade of grass, a single twig, Setsura could build a bridge and find a way.

The air rang out. Kikiou came to his senses and jutted the staff at him. In that instant, his right hand came off at the wrist. In the next, Setsura fell vertically. The blast from Kikiou's staff had severed his devil wire.

"Uh-oh."

As Setsura fell, he flung out a second devil wire toward Kikiou. A sound like an angry horsefly buzzed from Kikiou's robes, repelling the wire about a foot in front of him. Evincing no sign of pain, he bounded down to the edge of the roof and stopped in amazement.

Instead of hitting the ground, Setsura had flown off in a completely different direction. Just before toppling over, he had raced down along its falling arc to the mausoleum on the lake.

"Son of a bitch!" Kikiou cried out, with a wave of his right hand. But the hand holding the staff—from which the killer *qi* should have come—wasn't there anymore. By the time he'd run over to the edge of the tiles and picked it up, Setsura had alighted on the small island.

The alchemist's body shook with rage. While tending to Galeen Nuvenberg in the hospital, Setsura had learned that to a vampire the casket was not only a safe place to sleep, but was a kind of battery that stored up the energy that fed its immortality.

"That is not allowed, you little punk!"

A whirling sound drowned out his rage. The humming spilled out from his robes as Kikiou too danced through the air, grasping his right hand and staff in his left. The sound came from the metal ring concealed beneath his cloak that supplied and transformed his power.

He fell like a rock, his velocity dropping at the halfway point. He touched down no harder than a jump down from a first-floor landing.

The humming grew louder. As soon as he straightened, he started running with the ferociousness of an angry tiger. It would take him three minutes to get to the wood plank wharf. Beyond it, a sharp gust whipped the waves into whitecaps.

No matter how fast he rowed, Setsura would arrive at the door to the mausoleum before him. A hundred feet from the wharf. To Kikiou, it might as

well be forever.

But instead of burning up with impotent rage—a look on his face that would cause all of creation to cower before—he came to the end of the dock and smiled a sly smile.

“You think you will arrive before me, my bad star? I have not exhausted all of my skills. That island will become your graveyard.”

He took the staff from his right hand and flourished it high above his head. Then brought it down as if to split the air. A blue column of water shot across the peaceful lake. Like a dragon parting the waters, the invisible *qi* threw up a white spray that struck Setsura and the mausoleum like a fire hose.

But Setsura had seen Kikiou’s attack coming. Calculating its velocity and his own reaction time, he ducked behind a nearby stone column and covered his face with his hands. A stinging numbness attacked his cheeks. The force of the killer *qi* had diminished after traveling the thousand feet between them.

Peeking out from around the column, Setsura realized his good fortune. The impact from the killer *qi* had knocked the iron door into the mausoleum ajar, even before he’d attempted the same with his devil wire.

“Lucky break,” he mumbled to himself, though without rejoicing. Before Kikiou could strike again, he slipped like a shadow into the gap.

The light from the doorway illuminated the windowless interior with a blue light. Perhaps due to the residual effects of the killer *qi*, his skin tingled as if from static electricity. He ignored it.

Descending the stairs from the doorway, he came to a room approximately twenty feet square. In the center was a simple black casket. Unadorned, except for its lustrous finish and sturdy construction, it seemed all ready for the grave.

Before descending the stairs, Setsura cast his devil wire ahead to reconnoiter the room.

The walls and ceiling and floors were single slabs of rock, with seams so tightly spaced that the devil wire itself could find no opening between them. Nevertheless, the faint feedback and reverberations he felt through the wire as it slid along the surface told him that no booby traps awaited him there.

That couldn't be said about anyplace else but the Princess's burial plot. Though there was another signal that he couldn't quite process. The feel of the rock was strange. Like granite, except for the last one percent that felt like *something else*.

A disturbance in the air. The door behind him was closing. Setsura didn't move. He didn't think he could manipulate his devil wire and destroy the casket from the outside. The casket alone was going to be a hell of a challenge. But he would do it here, with his own two hands. He had no choice.

Perhaps Kikiou had a trick up his sleeve with his killer *qi*. The door had opened consequential to the attack on Setsura. Maybe opening the door had been his intent all along.

Darkness ruled the inside of the mausoleum. It soon filled with light. Candle holders jutted out from the walls. Points of fire glowed atop the blue candles.

"They must be happy to see me."

Setsura descended the stone staircase and approached the casket. He cast out his devil wire. And was not surprised when it rebounded without leaving a scratch on the black surface. There was nothing that suggested a keyhole or lock. It must only open to Princess's touch.

"I suppose I'll have to wait until she gets home." He shook his head. "No. That'd be wrong. Like a grave robber asking for help. And worse, then turning on the Good Samaritan once the job was done."

What would Kikiou think about such ruminations?

"Here we go." The young master of a *senbei* shop abruptly sat down cross-legged on the floor as if launching into a state of meditation. Were the tourists who visited his shop just for a peek at his face to witness such a scene, they would exclaim aloud at his appearance.

Garlands of flowers and a bottle of wine would be a suitable offering to the young Buddha. Though if he raised a knee and bared a shoulder to reveal an orchid tattoo on the skin, the yakuza would show up in short order to recruit him. But now was not the time to open a gambling den. Before he could take a second breath, the lid of the casket creaked.

“I guess my presence isn’t so welcome after all.”

Setsura got to his feet and stood at the ready. The lid of the casket cleanly cracked open. And from that opening a thick fluid welled up and spilled down onto the floor. His devil wires had analyzed its properties before it reached his feet. Water. Pure water.

“Water torture?”

A second later, the casket lid opened wide and a veritable waterfall poured out.

“I knew that old guy was up to something.”

The water had already reached his ankles. He waved his right hand. The wire split the wall without leaving a mark behind. The feedback made him scratch his head. The wall wasn’t stone. It wasn’t water. It wasn’t gelatin. If pressed for a description, he would have called it *rock water*.

“Can you hear me, Setsura?” Kikiou called out above the sound of the water. The water was up to his thighs. “None of her enemies have come here before. But it turns out that preparing a fake casket was the proper precautionary step to take.”

Setsura ignored him and threw a strand of wire toward the ceiling. And got the same results.

“That is water stone. Water made of stone. Stone made of water. It can be cut, but it cannot. It can be crushed, but it cannot. During the Hsia Dynasty, it was used to build pens for fire-breathing dragons.”

Turning to water, it extinguished the flames. Turning to stone, it prevented any escape. It would be hard to think of a better building material for barriers of all kinds. The only question that remained was whether Setsura was more incorrigible than a dragon.

The water reached his waist.

“Some complimentary service, perhaps?” Setsura asked, while searching for an exit. But he detected nothing with his devil wire.

“The location of Princess’s casket?”

“Yes. And one other thing. The true nature of this world. I had thought to get a

detailed explanation from you after I had taken care of the Demon Princess's casket. But that seems the riskier approach right now."

"You sound like a prisoner making a last request. Princess's grave is here. There is no doubt about that. But the real thing sleeps at the bottom of the lake. Once you have drunken your fill here, you may rest in the fake one."

"Huh."

Setsura looked down at his feet, but could barely see them. The water had reached his neck.

"As for the second, you would not understand even if I explained it. I questioned Yakou after he became Princess's servant, and he and his underlings seemed to have noticed. When you join him in hell—which will be soon enough—feel free to ask him."

"How did she surmount those skills of his?"

"Only Princess knows. But I have heard that the leaves of the moon lily brewed into a tea will weaken the strongest magic."

"Thanks for the tip," Setsura said, spitting out a mouthful of water.

He kicked off the floor. The water flowed around him all the more vigorously.

Part Eleven: Handsome Madness

Chapter One

Hitomi decided that as soon as it was morning, she would dress Takako and take her to the hospital. This was not the safest time of day in Shinjuku. But Mephisto Hospital was open 24/7.

The kiss of a vampire didn't require much in the way of a diagnosis. Though the Toyama clans didn't drink the blood of outsiders, now and then exceptions popped up. Usually a vampire interloper.

Even so, there was something *off* about Takako's appearance.

Her pale, wax-like skin. Lips that had lost all color. Her emaciated frame. Empty eyes that from time to time radiated a hair-raising light. The standard reaction of a victim. Hitomi had worked in the muckraking trade long enough that none of this was all that unusual.

Except that vibe in her gut saying Takako was altogether *different*.

Right now she was sitting next to Ryuuki in the completely dark back room. Ryuuki was lying down. She was sitting with her legs under her in the "traditional" fashion. She didn't move. She didn't once look at the man who had brought her here. She just sat there.

Since bringing Ryuuki back here, bathed in the light of dawn, only once had she cracked open the sliding door and peeked inside. And it was enough to curdle her blood. That was how creepy a human being could be doing nothing but only sitting there.

This was no mere victim. Hitomi didn't think she belonged with Ryuuki. The relationship between them was not the ordinary one between master and servant. She was afraid this was more a case of the tail wagging the dog.

Hitomi firmly secured the door and left with Takako. She was wearing a tracksuit and a head scarf. The ashen young girl remained as silent as the

morning sky.

Hitomi had planned to hail a taxi on Okubo Avenue. But a bus showed up when she got there. The largely autonomous Shinjuku was not part of the Tokyo metropolitan bus system. This was one of the small, unscheduled ward buses that ran off the main lines. They usually ran on a set course, but could be convinced to make detours.

A raised hand brought it to a halt. This one ran the number 37 route. From Okubo Avenue across Meiji Avenue to Shinjuku Avenue and the station. If she got off at Yasukuni Avenue, it'd be a five-minute walk to Mephisto Hospital.

There were seven people in the bus. The driver waited until they had taken their seats. Hitomi was impressed by his consideration, a feeling that stayed with her even after she fell asleep.

The bus didn't take the usual left at the Meiji Avenue intersection, but went right and continued on to West Waseda and Takada no Baba.

A short time later, a taxi paused at the same intersection and turned right onto Okubo Avenue. The caw of a raven came from far away.

On a back street in the Wakamatsu District, an old woman in a wheelchair got out of the taxi. Fatigue played like shadows across her deeply-wrinkled foreign face. But her eyes held an uncanny clarity. Not cold. Not possessed. Eyes that saw a different world than the one governed by natural law.

Those eyes gazed up at the sky. With a loud flapping of wings, a raven flew down and alighted on her shoulder.

"The automobile cannot continue further," said Galeen Nuvenberg, the Czech Republic's great wizardess. "Onward."

"Yes, Ma'am," said the big raven with an unusual meekness. It took a firm hold on the back of the wheelchair headrest. The sweep of its wings stirred the dust in the alley. The wheelchair slowly moved forward.

"She's pretty carefree about making such demands," the raven said under its breath.

"How is that?"

“Why do I have to be the engine that makes this crate move? I may be made out of ectoplasm, but ectoplasm gets tired too.”

“You haven’t been flying as much as you should lately. I hazard that was a good six pounds that landed on my shoulder. The smart and handsome bird of my making was half that.”

“Oh.”

“Any further complaints?”

“No.”

During this exchange, the beating of its wings didn’t abate in the slightest. The old lady had the crow cowed but good. At the same time, Nuvenberg wasn’t doing it for spite or out of laziness. Her hands clasped together, her eyes closed, from her thin lips issued the words of a spell.

That kind of preparatory work was required when visiting the person they were going to see next.

What looked like a passing tour group gave the duo long, curious looks.

The two eventually arrived at a clearing among the demolished buildings and a house shaped like a mushroom.

“That?” the old woman asked.

“Yes.”

“The ward mayor and I may have awakened to the reality of the situation with a deadly slowness. Fortunately for us, he is still inside.”

“What about the girl?”

“She is not. Only one demon vibe.”

“So—shall we do it?”

“For what reason do you think we came here?”

“Yeah.”

Nuvenberg glanced at the bird perched over her head. “We could sure use her at a time like this.”

Having received the brunt force of two .45 rounds, the doll girl's "corpse" had been taken to her house in Magic Town by the mayor's men. The raven followed Matthews and his team, and then Takako when she slipped away during the death match between Princess and General Bey. It observed the chance meeting between Takako and Ryuuki and tracked them here.

Nonetheless, her frustrations were understandable. "Did you not have the good sense to split in two and follow General Bey or Princess as well? Ah, the sun could have risen in the west and your grandfather wouldn't have bungled a job like that."

"No, indeed," agreed the raven, scratching its head with its right wing. "But I wasn't made to come apart like that. And when I do, I can't fly very well."

"Then give up the ghost and recite your last will and testament to the rats and the worms."

"As you wish." The bird bowed deeply. More than a mere master-servant relationship truly tied the two of them together.

"However, the Demon Princess and Mephisto, General Bey and Ryuuki—do we want to make enemies of all of them, including Setsura Aki? That is one scary man."

A look of fondness crossed the old woman's face, as if bringing to mind the face of the handsome *senbei* shop owner. And then was quickly replaced by her normal, serious mien. "The house of a stranger. We must mind our manners. Knock on the door. No, do as your grandfather would do. Rap on the window."

"Will do."

Invigorated by its master's spirit, the big raven powerfully flapped its wings in a manner quite unlike it and flew over to the window of the mushroom house.

Kajiwara was beside himself with anger. The casket of the Demon King, General Bey, had been spirited away from its underground bunker in a cloud of sleeping gas. It could be anywhere by now. The doll girl was a wreck. Not to mention the atomic bomb left behind as a going-away present.

And to top things off, the antidote for the gas wasn't fast-acting, so they didn't wake up until morning.

There was only one group who would go to such lengths. While shouting to get the Ministry of Defense on the line, his strongest ally, Galeen Nuvenberg, went missing. According to a nurse at the police headquarters infirmary, sometime around two o'clock there came a tapping at the window. She opened the window and a big crow came flying in.

And when she shooed it out again, it said, "I am a servant of this woman. Go on, get lost and don't come back. *Nevermore*."

Hearing the fierceness in its voice and sensing the echoes of filial affection toward the old woman, the nurse left the room. She was called to an emergency case, and when she returned, the crow and the woman were gone.

"I am surrounded by incompetents. Can't anybody come through for me when the chips are down?" he railed to the one man left in the room.

He raced back to his Ward Government Offices, got the Defense Ministry on a secure line, and demanded to speak with the Director of Special Forces. He was told in turn that no such person existed.

"Then get me the Minister," he persisted.

Perhaps because of the weight that the mayor of Demon City could throw around, this request was granted. But the Minister only laughed at the mention of a Special Forces contingent operating in Shinjuku.

This was standard operating procedure when it came to any kind of covert action, but Kajiwara hit the roof. Slamming down the receiver, his mind went into overdrive.

The goal of Special Forces Operational Detachment F was supposedly the extermination of vampires in Shinjuku. Then why run off with General Bey's casket? Probably to lure out the other Chinese vampires. But the mayor's intuition said other motives might be at play. For example, the Ministry of Defense wanting a closer look at General Bey's legendary power.

As a dyed-in-the-wool pol, Kajiwara knew where the bodies were buried in every agency and ministry. Starting with the Welfare Ministry's informal contacts with the Toyama residents, back-channel efforts—public and private—to reduce the threat posed by Shinjuku were almost too numerous to mention.

General Bey's "talents" far exceeded those of the Toyama bunch. He would hardly be surprised if every division commander in Japan's SDF wanted a piece of him.

Kajiwara made a note on a memo pad. He called his secretary and told her to have the computer analysts draw up predictions for all related phenomena.

Once the data was entered, the results were ready in three minutes. Kajiwara's eyes lingered over the thick printout. "So it's Toyama, eh?" he said with a sigh.

That morning, a large number of delivery trucks arrived from outside the ward.

However autonomous it might fancy itself, Shinjuku was still a part of the greater Tokyo metropolitan area. A few notable exceptions aside, this was a free trade zone, with few restrictions on what went in or came out. And this morning saw an excess of at least fifty four-ton trucks.

Only one deviated from the normal route. The vehicle from Tono Transport was not in the best condition, and its engine seemed on the verge of shaking itself apart. But it did its job well enough to carry its freight.

After passing through the Waseda Gate, it continued down Meiji Avenue to the Toyama housing project. The men who got out were dressed in camouflage military fatigues. Nobody would be surprised to see Self-Defense Force personnel in this city. Or a media crew carrying video equipment and a laser transmitter following behind them.

The first one to take note was the guard manning the high voltage barricade. Leveling his shotgun, he called out, "What do you want?"

"Film crew," said the middle-aged man wearing a baseball cap. He presented a business card. "Special effects team from Keiho Studios. We've been in contact with your director. You should have gotten the memo."

"When was that?" the guard asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Two days ago."

The guard lowered his shotgun level with the man's chest. "The director's been out of the office for a while now. You're gonna have to come up with a better lie than that to get in here."

The guard's finger was on the trigger, but the middle-aged man was faster. He pressed a switch in his right hand. The business card exploded like a large firecracker, blowing a sizable hole in the guard's chest and throwing him backwards onto the ground. The rest of the guards were quickly dispatched with flechette rounds from air guns no louder than loud claps.

"How's it going?" the middle-aged man asked.

The man perched on the barricade threw the cut-off switch and held up his thumb. "All clear."

A laser knife burned away the lock. The men in camouflage stole into the concrete plaza. The film crew began assembling a crane platform.

"Camera ready."

"Are the lights okay?"

"Where're the tapes? I need the tapes."

The lively voices of the film crew faded away behind them. The SDF soldiers crept toward the quarters where citizens of this city slept. Twenty of the best that Special Forces had to offer. Death on two feet.

"Four squads, five men each," the commander ordered. "Sweep each floor and keep me apprised of the situation. Stay in constant contact."

"A squad, roger."

"B squad, roger."

"C squad, roger."

"D squad, roger."

The commander pointed at the nearest building and was about to start off at a slow jog when he felt a dull rumble through the soles of his combat boots. A second later, a roaring sound. The soldiers turned just in time to see the film equipment and crew fly into the air.

"Hands in the air."

The order came from a second-story window of the building they were about to enter. A man with a broad forehead. A former Shinjuku highway patrolman by

the name of Tateoka. He was wearing a riot helmet and was holding a mike. From the windows to his left and right jutted the barrels of automatic rifles with 35 mm grenade launchers.

One soldier made a run for the cover of an oak tree off to the right. The report of a submachine gun was followed by puffs of dirt drawing a ring around him. The man toppled over.

“When it comes to hitting the target, you SDF guys got nothing on us,” Tateoka boasted in a throaty voice.

The Special Forces soldiers froze in place. They were seconds away from being painted across the walls. They’d had the drop on them from the start.

“Got you covered from that building over there too. More than enough RPGs to take you all out. Don’t take us for a bunch of lazy-ass beat cops like you’re used to. You didn’t give the guards there any warning either.”

“I got no problem with surrendering,” said the commander. “But tell me one thing.”

“About the people who live here?”

“Yeah. Where’d you move them?”

“You can’t communicate with the outside, you know. We’re jamming all of your com frequencies.”

“I figured. Not arguing with you on that point. So now that you got us, what do you intend to do with us?”

“For starters, lodge a formal complaint with the Ministry of Defense,” Tateoka said in a threatening manner.

That was the mayor’s idea. Say, in exchange for the prisoner swap, toss a little defense budget pork in their direction. And maybe a little help in rounding up the victims of vampire attacks.

“They inside there?” the commander asked again. “I don’t know who clued you onto us. But moving two hundred caskets is no mean feat.”

“Sure isn’t. But what do you say we arrest you and take this conversation someplace else? We’d like to hear what your business was with them in the first

place.”

Tateoka laughed to himself. A strange conversation, if he said so himself. The thing trapped didn’t know what he was doing there, and the trapper didn’t know why he’d set the snare. All he’d been told was to take a breather from tracking down vampire victims and head out here with his men.

“Well, hearing that’s enough to take a load off my mind.” The commander grinned. “*Now!*”

His men were ready. White smoke billowed from beneath their feet. A smokescreen. The chemicals catalyzed in the air and quickly obscured them. From within the cloud come the flash of firearms and the bark of guns. The bullets tore into the roof and walls.

“Fire!” Tateoka shouted, in rather jovial tones.

The automatic weapons and 35 mm grenades rained down from both sides, shredding the clumps of smoke into frenzied cotton balls. From here and there in the shuddering haze came screams and explosions, but fewer than Tateoka would have expected.

From the windows on his right came tortured yells. Bodies toppled to the ground.

“Bastard—”

Tateoka rechanneled all his irritation toward the vampires at his foes in the white cloud. He pressed the trigger and held it down.

As soon as the commander started his run for the building, he felt a red-hot poker stab from the left side of his neck down into his abdomen. *Shit*, he said to himself. *No flesh wound, that*.

The current mission objective—exterminating the Toyama vampires—was completely fucked. The last laugh would be his, but it was hardly one to put in the win column. He could hear his colleagues falling all around him in the smoke. These Shinjuku cops deserved to be taken seriously.

“That was one crazy ass demand this General Bey chap made. Well, guys, I’ll leave the rest up to you, wherever you are.”

He reached into the right-hand pocket of his fatigues. The switch was there. He hadn’t wanted to use it, but—he pressed it with all his might.

A white ball of light engulfed the west entrance of the Toyama housing project. In a flash, its circumference drew into its rainbow-colored maw the grounds of the housing project and the neighboring houses.

In what would later be known as the “Toyama District Nuclear Incident,” the accusation by the ward government was that a Special Forces unit of the SDF had smuggled the active components of a tactical nuclear weapon into Shinjuku inside their bodies.

The Ministry of Defense never formally denied the charge.

Chapter Two

Five minutes had passed since the interior of the mausoleum filled with water. However accursed an omen he might be, Setsura Aki was still a man and he could not hold his breath forever.

Kikiou smiled. Strangely for this evil old man, this smile was pure. He would hold his ground forever, if that's what it took. He laughed loudly.

A "stain" appeared in the door to the mausoleum. The wall itself turned opaque. A human figure appeared from further inside, as if striding through deep water.

"Setsura."

Even this demonic warlock spoke his name in awe. The "stain" was the black-clad young man, calmly taking leave of the "water stone" that could hold back even a fire-breathing dragon.

"I do not know of a way to escape the water stone. How did you do it, Setsura? This is a puzzle that must be solved."

Kikiou brought his forefinger and middle finger to his mouth and blew, producing a shrill whistle quite unlike him.

Setsura wandered down to the water's edge as if Kikiou wasn't there at all. Several seconds later, over their heads came the fierce beating of wings. The descending shadow cast Setsura into darkness. The silhouette of a large wing a good thirty feet long.

Setsura didn't bother looking, even when a giant claw closed around his head.

The Ming Dynasty classic, *In Search of Strange Worlds*, contained a record of a giant wing and claw appearing over the capital. It captured and killed five children in the morning, five at noon, and four in the evening, and then left. The

shocking scene repeated itself the next day, though five were taken in the morning, five at noon, and five in the evening, a total of fifteen. The number did not change the day after that.

The wise men in the city made note of this strange madness. After a frantic search they found a girl who had been attacked and escaped by the skin of her teeth. Questioning her further revealed that she had been sleepwalking at the time, wandering through the neighborhood when the monster attacked.

They gathered hypnotists from throughout the kingdom and put the people in the capital into a trance. The monster did not appear after that and the creature itself went into history unnamed.

Kikiou summoned it to attack Setsura. The only people safe from such an assault were those lost in a dream state. Kikiou cried out in dismay. The giant claws closed together as if grasping thin air.

Setsura approached the shore without a mark on him. The waves broke on the rocks. He walked across the water.

Now the hidden mystery that was Setsura struck Kikiou forcefully. “Only dreamers are safe from my half-bird. I do not understand, Setsura, what kind of miracle you are performing here. But you have turned into a dream.”

Ah, the clam was dreaming. Dreaming of a beautiful young man. The soles of his shoes didn’t sink. He looked almost transparent. The scenery behind him appeared as if through dark glass.



Kikiou’s groan was entirely reasonable. How did one strike at a person who had turned into a dream?

The giant claw pursued Setsura across the water, piercing his chest and stomach and waist, but to no effect.

Setsura looked up. A silver light flashed from his mouth and wrapped the claw and wing in light. They severed and fell away. The lifeless wing and trembling claw fell into the water behind him. Setsura glided onward. To the left bank where Kikiou stood. To the road that had brought him to this world.

The silver threads again poured from his mouth. A filament carried here by the wind. A filament there by the water. Severing anything they encountered.

A boat floating far off was engulfed in a shimmering dew and bit by bit dropped into the water.

Trees in the forest beyond split apart horizontally and vertically, littering the ground with limbs.

A large snake popped out of the water and was neatly divided into thirds, each section dropping away in a puff of red like sausages going through a buzz saw.

“Bastard! You’re not getting away, Setsura Aki!”

Grinding his teeth, Kikiou fled the wharf. Thin strands of light attacked the posts and wooden planks, a human jigsaw gone mad.

“Wake up, I tell you! Do you not understand? You are nothing but a dream!”

The silvery gleam undulated back and forth like a wave, gliding over the ground in pursuit of the old man chasing after Setsura.

How far would this strange, three-sided chase drama go? And when and how would it be resolved?

“Hey, take a look at that.”

“Wow. Far out. What in the world is it?”

“No idea. This morning when I opened for business, there it was.”

The first two speakers were customers who had come to the shop to buy flowers. The last was the shop girl who worked at the place, who wasn’t

qualified to do anything more than observe the situation along with the rest of them.

Every customer that morning asked the same question, and left shaking their heads. Here in the Yonchome block of the Wakamatsu district in Shinjuku, a small miracle had occurred in the *Water Queen* flower shop.

When the shop girl opened the shutters several hours earlier, she took in the display in the shop window—that she had arranged the night before—with a start.

Thanks to developments in fertilizers, even with the stems intact, the bloom and beauty of roses, lilies, irises, and cyclamen could be preserved for long periods of time. But in their stead, greeting her was an indescribable transfiguration.

The thick bed of petals—tranquil whites and pinks and passionate reds and sad blues—an otherworldly mélange of color and hues, accompanied by a rich fragrance that had stopped her in her tracks when the shop girl first came in.

It was hard to believe this could be the product of nature or human effort. For the shop girl—she only worked there, after all—the cause was a complete mystery. She frantically phoned the owner, who told her to buck up and just sell them. And so she finally returned to her senses.

One other thing she'd taken note of. A number of liquid plant food tanks were scattered in front of the prefab shed behind the store where the fertilizer and supplies were kept. She was sure she'd stored them away the day before. The door to the shed appeared to be jammed closed and wouldn't budge.

The shop girl gave up. She certainly had no idea that a woman was sleeping in there. Equally out of the question was that this woman had sung the siren's song of blood and darkness and destruction for the past four thousand years.

The shop girl didn't know that the demonic spirits emanating from her presence injected the gentlest flower with a raging boldness, transforming it in wondrous ways. It would never occur to her that when the sun set, crimson light would flash from that woman's eyes, or that in order to quench the hunger within, the woman would desire to embrace her and sink her white fangs into her tender throat.

When Hitomi came to, she found herself inside a latticework of iron bars. The walls and floor and ceiling of the twelve by twelve foot room were made of concrete. A narrow hallway led away from the bars. The only light came from an electrical fixture in the hallway ceiling.

Her thoughts still seemed to be struggling through a mist. Thinking about how she came to be here, Hitomi looked around hastily.

Takako lay on the ground behind her. Hitomi rushed over to her and shook her. She opened her eyes. Hitomi paid no attention to the icy coolness of her body. There was no point explaining what they were doing here. She didn't know, and it was obvious that whatever waited for them couldn't be good.

Hitomi shook the bars of their cell. Nothing budged. She checked her watch. It was four-fifteen in the afternoon. Evening in July was still some time off.

With a small sense of relief, she looked down at Takako. Even if the victim of a vampire attack didn't herself become a demon at sundown, she would seek human blood. Everybody knew that. On the other hand, if the man called Ryuuki was a vampire and she was his servant, then he would come here for her using his supernatural powers.

And that thought thrilled Hitomi down to her bones.

Instead, an older man in a grungy white lab coat showed up wearing thick glasses. "Doctor Kuranishi!" Hitomi said, his name coming to her in a flash. "You're still alive!"

The "serial killer scholar" whose exploits had shaken Demon City two years before. He gazed upon Hitomi and smiled. "So somebody in the world above still remembers that name? I'd like to think that an honor. But bringing up the unpleasant past only causes unnecessary trouble."

Simply speaking the words changed the gaze of this experimenter on human subjects into one of loathing.

"However, this time around we have ourselves such important test material. Nobody will be hurt. Instead, I will inform you, step by step, what will happen next. That should put quite a fright into you."

"W-what's that?" She was doing her best to put up a brave front, but it showed

in her quavering voice. “Can’t you hear that?”

The old man’s face turned toward the iron door. From beyond the door came the unmistakable sound of a drum—the beats loud and soft, smoothly blending together and roughly breaking apart.

An old memory made Hitomi shiver. His past victims. The corpses discovered under Kuranishi’s house. Seeing what he had done to them made the toughest cops blanch. The victims lured there were all women. But people who passed by there all reported the sound of drums fading away into the bright moonlit nights.

Perhaps it too was alive.

“Can you feel it yet?” Kuranishi said.

Feel what, Hitomi was about to ask, when she suddenly realized that she was throbbing and wet. *From that music alone?*

“Don’t be alarmed. What you are feeling is the normal reaction. That taiko drum amplifies the tremors of life and the pleasures of sex. Only one player remains, its performance abandoned long ago to the bowels of the earth.”

“If you let me go, I won’t tell anybody. I swear. Not a word.”

“If you think I would find such assurances believable, then you must be one very stupid girl. That one was bitten by a vampire. I bagged two trophies today. Ah, I haven’t hunted so well in quite a while.”

“The sun will set soon. If you don’t release her unharmed, her master will surely come for her.”

“Whether our friends in Toyama or refugees from Eastern Europe, I have ways of dealing with them. Don’t forget that I am a citizen of this city as well,” Kuranishi sneered. “However, before they arrive, I shall see for myself. I’ll save you for later. A little waiting will do you well. After I’ve enjoyed myself first.”

Degenerate lust radiated from the old professor. He came closer. Hitomi instinctively backed away. Kuranishi reached into the pocket of his lab coat and drew out what looked like a piece of root or tree branch or arm of an octopus. He tossed it between the bars of the cell.

The wall against her back, Hitomi had no more room to retreat.

The thing rolled and undulated like a taut spring, advancing with a frightening vigor. Hitomi braced herself to bat it away. Almost as if it knew to feint and parry, it slipped past the downward slash of her arm and stole up her leg and inside her skirt.

She reached down and tried to scream, but was rendered inarticulate by a shock of pleasure radiating from between her legs.

Hitomi's mind was thrown into confusion. The sense of sexual ecstasy was overpowering. She was hardly starved for experience with the opposite sex. Yet she'd never reached the heights as strongly and quickly as this.

Unimpeachable evidence of her physical bliss escaped her lips and permeated her body, wiping away any vestiges of shame.

But it wasn't burrowing deeper into her.

Writhing on the floor, Hitomi unconsciously pressed her hands against her sex, pushing it in, seeking a deeper, stronger invasion.

All at once it slipped out. The sensation of it rubbing past her slippery inner folds made her cry aloud.

Her breaths emerged in feeble gasps. She turned her moist, entranced eyes on Kuranishi. Gripped in his veiny hands was what looked like a dark brown piece of a branch from a tree. Except it was moving. Like the foot of the mollusk. It squirmed as if to escape his grasp.

Had Hitomi's mind been operating normally, she would have noticed that the licentious movements and the reverberations of the drum swimming through the room appeared to be subtly syncopating with each other.

"Your eyes are wet. Indeed, they should be. None of the women in whom the little fellow has made his burrow can forget that throbbing feeling. When it bends and stretches, the whole world goes away. All it needs is a peek inside and *voilà*, she becomes a crazed nymphomaniac for life. And yet no matter the skill of the Lothario she sleeps with, getting screwed by him will never be more than a simple screwing. Such will be her frustrations that in as little as three years, she is doomed to die in agony. Imagine it! A woman driven crazy by the thirst for sex while in the embrace of a man."

Kuranishi laughed out loud. But he wasn't speaking to Hitomi. A fierce light burned in his eyes. The fires of madness.

The mad scientist whose name was emblazoned in the criminal records of Demon City turned his incandescent gaze from Hitomi to Takako.

"Mortal women have their place. From the two-hundred-year-old grandmother to the newborn baby, their value is a settled thing. But these creatures of the night are a different matter. From all outward appearances, the victim of a vampire. A shame she is not an actual vampire. But we can extrapolate. It was well worth my time and money to hire a bus and crew to scavenge for test subjects. Come here, woman."

He beckoned to her, but Takako might well have turned into a statue. Only a vampire, the victim's master, could deliver such orders.

The particular frustrations of the mad fueled the glowing heat in Kuranishi's eyes. "Fine. You won't come? Then, suffer there. That pale flesh of yours shall experience all the more detailed experiments afterwards."

He opened his hand and released the wriggling thing. It fell to the floor. Unlike with Hitomi, it moved at a leisurely pace as it approached its fresh game. The creature could apparently detect the different physical condition of this new opponent.

What to outside eyes must have looked like an old dried-up piece of wood, flexed and moved like warm rubber that would fill any woman familiar with the allure of sex with a longing for the obscene.

Simply imagining it stealing into her physical being, stimulating and arousing her senses, tore from Hitomi hot, dogged breaths.

Chapter Three

Takako's eyes were vacant.

As if the blood of the *other* carried with it the soul of the *other*, this salacious branch that had made the hearts of women beat fast despite themselves aroused in her not the slightest reaction.

It came to Takako's feet. The tapered end slipped inside the leg of her sweatpants and disappeared. The small lump traveled up her ankle, across her knee, and to her thighs. Imagining what awaited it at the end of its journey, this could only be the quiet prelude to a most savage scene.

Kuranishi gripped the bars of the cell. A small shiver traveled down Takako's body. The twig had surely arrived at its destination. Kuranishi's face was drenched with wretched anticipation. And soon turned to disappointed surprise.

Takako didn't move at all.

"This is not possible—" moaned the madman. "Nothing exists on this planet that can consume my branches and continue on as if nothing were amiss. There is no way."

The mad scientist was about to fall into despair when the expression changed on Takako's face. In a twinkle, it had darkened with ecstasy. Either a credit to the wood or its creator. Soft pants—that would make man and woman alike grab themselves—issued from her pale lips.

"It's working! Even the victim of a vampire cannot deny herself the pleasures of the flesh. The name of Dr. Kuranishi has never known failure! None shall ever exceed me!"

Evil and madness, fortune and insanity clouded his countenance. A flash of insight came with his next utterance.

“Chief among those instincts controlling the body and soul of a vampire is the lust for blood. The joys of my wood may exceed even that. Ah, a once in a lifetime opportunity to put the theory into action!”

He refocused his gaze from the moaning Takako to the reporter, still suffused with the reverberations of unsated desire. He beckoned to her.

“Wouldn’t you again like to drink from the well of bliss? As a woman? Come and love it, fully and deeply. Come.”

No matter how deranged and treacherous a criminal, his brilliance as a scientist was unquestioned. Hitomi had been eyeing the squirming Takako, gripped by envy and hatred. Now she came tottering to her feet. With uncertain sleepwalking steps, she approached the bars of the cell.

“Hold out your hands.”

She thrust out her arms between the bars. Ripe and womanly arms. Kuranishi pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist. With the echoes of the wood still resounding in her frame, she stiffened and groaned.

The old man’s tongue licked the young woman’s forearm, leaving behind a trail of slime as if from a large slug. He reached her elbow and continued back down a different path.

The lover’s caresses of this awful geezer brought tears to her eyes. And then a second later, a scream of pain. Bright red flowers blossomed on the floor as a trickle of blood ran down her arm.

The mad scientist had bitten her wrist down to the vein. Restraining the wailing girl with his hands and mouth, he shouted, “Blood! The fresh blood of a woman. The stuff of life.”

The side of his face was smeared with Hitomi’s blood, transforming the face of the madman into that of a beast.

More blood spilled from her trembling wrist, filling the room with the thick smell of salt and iron.

“Stop,” Hitomi said in a rational voice. The pain canceled out the lust and restored her to her normal self. “This woman was taken by a vampire. What do

you think the odor of blood will do to her?”

“Relax. See for yourself. This parasite of the night has forgotten all about her quest for prey. The sexual impulse controls all others. I have done it. My wood wins over all others.”

He roared with laughter, rearing his head back and baring his Adam’s apple. Such an evil sound was rarely heard even in this accursed city.

But in the next breath he was quiet.

Kuranishi let go of Hitomi, lips and hands alike. Nevertheless, Hitomi did not retreat. Her arms resting on one of the horizontal bars of the cell, she twisted her body and looked back over her shoulder, her attention focused on a single point.

Kuranishi did the same.

Takako stood with her back against the wall, her face like white wax. The moment before she had appeared entranced, her features like a fog. Then before their eyes, a completely different expression welled up.

A hunger like that of a starving man at a buffet.

“This is not possible—” The old scientist coughed out the same words he had spoken before. “It is not possible. My wood would never surrender to the impulses of a vampire. It is simply impossible.”

What he did next was something only a man touched by madness would do. A sane man would take to his heels and run. But Kuranishi did not flee. A normal person would have taken steps to keep Takako locked up in the cell. Kuranishi reached into his pocket and took out a metal card and inserted it into the key slot.

The lock unlatched. The insane criminal pushed open the door and stepped inside.

“This girl has merely been bitten by a vampire and she makes a fool of me and my work? Like hell. You will show me the fruits of my labor. Weep for me. Wipe that haughty look off your face.”

Whether Takako heard him or not, she slowly walked forward, making Hitomi shriek. Covering the wound with her handkerchief, she sidled toward the open cell door. She was clearly the person Takako was aiming at.

Takako's eyes smoldered and glowed red. Hitomi froze in her tracks. As if savoring her fear, Takako reached out with both hands as she came closer, like a zombie out for a leisurely stroll.

"Blood—"

Takako's lips parted, revealing her white fangs. Hitomi couldn't shut her eyes. Just as Takako's hands reached for her throat, from the side Kuranishi seized her wrist with what was for him a surprising amount of force.

"She is not meant for you. You are meant for me," he said, dragging her toward the door of the cell.

Takako cast at him little more than a dismissive glance. The ghostly fire in her eyes froze the mad scientist where he stood.

"Insolent man," she said, her voice like a rumble from the earth, and waved her hand as if flicking away a fly.

Kuranishi flew away from her, striking the side of the cell so hard the iron bars sank into his back. He hung there momentarily two feet above the ground. The bars rattled. Kuranishi dropped to the floor with a thud. That he sprang to his feet at once was sure evidence that he had applied his science to his own body as well.

"Demon bitch! I won't let you get away with this!"

With an enraged glare in his eyes that spoke no surrender, he darted to the paralyzed Hitomi and grabbed her by the hand and ducked out the door.

"Ah, that must sting. Your prey is mine now. If you want her, try and take her away from me."

Rising to the challenge, Takako gripped the bars with both hands. "Blood—"

The steel in her deranged voice resonated with the iron of the bars. The bars and frame ripped free of the concrete. The bolts spun through the air, one grazing Hitomi's cheek. Chunks of the stressed concrete ceiling rained down.

Takako appeared through this brutal torrent of white. The madman's body shook with delight. "Unbelievable! No matter how immortal the Toyama bastards might be, here is a vampire who hasn't completely turned, and her

power puts them to shame! Tell me, Miss, who is your sire?"

Her answer was a bounding leap—not at Hitomi—but at Kuranishi.

It wasn't a lust for blood, but retaliation against anyone who dared interfere with her quest for prey. Considering that the mad doctor's tree branch was still at work inside her, this behavior was unusual in the extreme.

Princess's blood demanded it.

Kuranishi dodged the sweeping, roundhouse blow, but not before the lightning-fast strike tore his lab coat and shirt asunder.

Beneath the fabric, the old man's flesh gleamed dark gray. His body was studded with metal parts. From his steel-encrusted ribs came the faint whirring of gears and motors. The old man's surgical skills had produced vintage work. He touched his right side.

"You broke a bolt in one of my hydraulic pistons. But no matter. A woman has challenged the product of my research. Bring it on. Let me introduce you to your true opponent."

Meanwhile, Hitomi scurried to the door behind her unnoticed.

Takako didn't need an invitation. Her eyes glittered with demonic malice and she pressed forward with her attack. Her hands had already seized his flesh. Her fingers pulsed torturously against his chest.

Kuranishi backed to the inner door. He pressed a switch on the wall. The sound of the taiko drum grew louder. The door opened slowly to reveal a room filled with white light.

From within that light came vaguely human shapes, wavering to and fro and up and down. With a *whoosh*, a rain of tapered rods of wood poured through the shower of light. In the next second, the thousands of them painted the inside of the door black.

The custom of using plants to symbolize the pleasures of sex was still found in parts of Africa and India. But even its practitioners were not likely to expect the "symbol" to behave like the real thing.

To say nothing of the wood that—burrowing its own way in—could well result

in the victim dying not in pain, but from pleasure.

Kuranishi's mad mind had come up with such a thing. His intent had been to scatter them about Shinjuku—for no particular reason. If compelled to come up with one, then to drive the women crazy and the men into the depths of despondency. And the results of *that* was something Kuranishi had given no thought to at all.

The beats of the drum grew more and more agitated.

Half-hidden behind the door opposite, Hitomi screamed. White fruits were attached to the attacking branches. They swayed back and forth, each of them a skull. Along with the branches protruding from the mouth and eye sockets came the dry sound of hollow laughter.

"Get her!" Kuranishi shouted. "Her face and heart and sex—stab her through and through."

Takako's fingers closed around his windpipe, digging into the skin and muscle and cartilage. Blood spurted out. Takako pressed her lips to his spasming throat and drank.

In the next instant, she coughed and jerked her head away and vomited the blood onto the floor.

Excepting its color and principal components, Kuranishi's blood was nothing like that of a normal human being. Oil and nourishment to sustain and supply his artificial heart and mechanical organs.

And obviously not agreeable with Takako's palate.

But her fury was not his friend. The poisonous blood streaming from his neck, with one hand Takako tossed him at the advancing branches. Black wooden tips burst from the front of his white lab coat, from his stomach—a scene that was strangely arousing.

The drumming abruptly ceased, as if the one making the wood dance had become aware of his partner's death.

The branches wormed their way though Kuranishi's body, rending it apart. A long minute later, a smaller body appeared inside it—no more than a yard tall—

carrying a cruel face atop its diminutive frame. The full lips in the middle of the black skin parted to reveal pure white teeth. He was wearing cutoff jeans. Hanging on his bare chest was a drum the size of a newborn child.

He fixed his narrow eyes on Takako as might an eagle focusing on a rabbit. He said, “You killed.” The statement was suffused with an emotion that masked the broken Japanese. “This man. My benefactor. He understood my drum. I swear. No matter how long. I will revenge.”

The next words seemed to change into music. A rhythmical sound came from the man’s chest. The branches rustled.

Hitomi felt the cold tendrils of a brand-new dread. The man who said to protect her was probably now sleeping peacefully in her home. The night would soon come again. The vampire sought out its servant and prey. It was said that no hiding place would frustrate the sire. She had to protect her until then.

That was the thought that stopped her from abandoning Takako’s frightening presence.

Hitomi ran up to her—standing ramrod straight—and wrapped her arms around her from the back. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

They made quickly for the door. The sound of the drum trailed behind them.

“I will not—kill you. Now,” said the little black man. “But. You cannot escape. Flee in fear. You will never—sleep well. This city—my allies—will track you down. Avenge and revenge. My revenge—never—slackens.”

“Hurry!”

Hitomi pulled Takako through the door and down the white hallway. The entranceway must be somewhere ahead of them. In the back of her mind, she was already working on the outlines of an article about the victim of a vampire, Doctor Kuranishi, and his strange and warped creations.

Part Twelve: Magic Murder Drum

Chapter One

The dream was dreaming a dream. The question was what dream Setsura Aki was dreaming right now.

The trees were visible behind him as he strode through the dense forest. He passed through any trees in his path as if they weren't there.

The giant clam was dreaming in the middle of the earth—dreaming of the beautiful genie that was Setsura. Extrapolate his trajectory and it led inexorably to the entrance to Shinjuku's Chuo Park.

Having changed into a dream, Setsura was being guided by the lingering instincts of his human self.

Nothing stood in his way. He wasn't of this world. But the silver filaments spewing from his mouth tore asunder the trees and rocks that *were* of this world.

Five minutes later came the sound of flapping wings above his head.

Like a rush of wind, a single strand of the undulating wires reached upwards.

The winged man dodged it as he observed in academic tones, "Dreaming the dream of the clam, eh? I see. I heard that my father and grandfather dreamed indefatigably of the women they pined for. But this dream may spell the end of Princess's world."

Though he wasn't quite as handsome as Setsura, his aristocratic bearing more than made up for it. This was Yakou, the young master of the Toyama clans. And now reduced to Princess's servant.

He was powerful enough that Setsura had not been able to defeat him outright. Kikiou had not employed him as an assassin because Princess's objectives had all along included winning Setsura over to their side. That made Yakou an enemy to Kikiou's goals.

Setsura's offensive had continued out of his sight. And now beyond the manor house, Yakou had finally caught up with him again.

From his lair, he noted the freakish Setsura leaving the mausoleum and understood at once that he had been absorbed into the dream of the clam. He followed him using his powers of flight, and had picked up his trail again.

"You're being a naughty boy, Kikiou. Princess is going to take you to the woodshed when she gets back. I'll settle for just enjoying your comeuppance."

His clear eyes focused on a particular point on Setsura's person. The breast of his black slicker. The wings stopped beating and folded along his back. He dropped like a rock. Toward the tip of Setsura's nose.

The deadly wires reached out to grasp him. But closed around empty space. Yakou had already reached out in a flash and soared up into the sky.

The wings calmly stroked the air and he more closely examined the object he'd plucked from Setsura's pocket. A small golden flute.

The doll girl had entrusted it to Setsura. The only thing that would wake the clam from its dream. At the height of their deadly duel, this scion of a powerful vampire lord had seen it poking out of his pocket and now grasped its qualities and power.

He twirled it around in his fingers. "General Bey's flute. If I blow on it, Setsura should return to his senses. But that might make things more chancy than they already are. I might hope to keep you closed up in this world until Princess returns. Though leave you to your own devices and the dream might well end up destroying the dream. What a quandary."

Yakou frowned and pondered. Then a smile lit up his face. Despite being Princess's prisoner, this was a bright and energized smile.

"Where there's a will, there's a way." His boyish expression grew sober again. "The half-dream, half-reality jujitsu my father taught me. This flute was a necessary component. I predict what will happen if it fails. Well, I'll only find out by trying."

Such leaping into action was so unlike his previous prudence that it must be a reflection of his sire's personality.

Yakou looked behind Setsura. “Kikiou, you bastard, you’re late. Did your tête-à-tête with Setsura go wrong somewhere along the line? Princess will have your hide for that as well.”

He put the flute to his lips and lowered his head and briefly blew.

Setsura stopped in his tracks. Purpose welled up in his blank expression. The whistle of the flute from above had awakened his consciousness from the dream. But through his sturdy but graceful frame, the stands of trees swayed in the summer breeze. Through his arms bloomed fragrant flowers.

This was a dream to which his real consciousness had returned. And yet still perfectly suited for Setsura Aki.

“Can you hear me?” came Yakou’s voice, from an unknown quarter.

“Yakou? Where are you?”

“If I tell you, I fear your filaments will follow. Your consciousness has returned, but your body is still dreaming. It regards all as its enemy and attacks without regard. I’d like to avoid any unnecessary bother.”

“Oh. So you blew on that whistle.”

“But not exactly the same way. I doubt there are five people in this world who know the difference.”

“In that case, how about giving it a good hard puff? Otherwise, hand it back.”

“In either case, will you take your leave, or stay and fight? Sorry, but I find both options unsatisfactory.”

“Traitor,” Setsura said cheerfully. The words took on a silver hue and sliced the nearby trees to kindling.

“Do you know what a frightening presence you are right now? Your dreaming body in your dream state holds only the instinct for preservation. Everything that comes close to you dies by a thousand cuts.”

“And what do you propose we do about that?” he asked in an utterly unflustered manner.

“You have to promise first.”

“Promise what?”

“That you will not leave here until Princess returns. And additionally, you won’t try to destroy everything in the meantime.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“Enough with the bad jokes.”

Setsura shrugged. Promises were made to be broken. “Okay,” he said in a serious voice. “I swear.”

“That will do,” Yakou agreed.

“There’s something I’d like to know.”

“What’s that?”

“Are you familiar with a plant called the moon lily?”

“Ah.”



“Never heard of it myself. Can you find it around here?”

“The back garden of the manor house. As the name suggests, it is a lily that blooms only on moonlit nights. It went extinct long ago in the human world.”

“Thanks.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“No comment.”

“The way you are right now, you’re not exactly in flower-picking condition.”

“Well, I did swear. How about you make me normal again?”

Yakou fell silent. He had to wonder if this guy was for real. “One more thing.”

A pause long enough for two breaths.

“Yes?” said Setsura, cocking his ears.

“Princess contacted me a short while ago. It seems she’d gotten hold of Takako Kanan.”

“So she and General Bey duked it out?”

“I can’t speak to the specifics.”

“Hey, if anything’s left of the old you, don’t go yanking my chain.”

“You are hardly one to talk.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

“But it is as I say. Do not forget that the life of a young woman depends on your actions.”

Setsura listened passively to these icy words from a man who had once pledged with all his might, mind and skill to protect Takako.

“Hold up your hand.” His voice was a bit harder than usual.

Setsura wasn’t ready at this point to place his trust in Yakou, but when it came to *her*, if she was fighting General Bey for Takako, the odds were she’d come out on top. Even Nuvenberg would have a difficult time of it in a situation like this.

“So how should we proceed?”

“Blow the whistle and get me back to normal. Then boogie on back to the manor house, keep out of sight of Kikiou, and hide out until Princess returns.”

“Agreed,” he nodded.

Yakou raised his head. The golden, glittering flute sang out again.

Hitomi hailed a taxi and got in with Takako.

Dr. Kuranishi’s hideout was in a broken-down building not far from the Toyama district. The street was crowded with emergency vehicles and cops. They were working to undo the traffic jam, but as always, were causing as much inconvenience as they were alleviating.

The driver grumbled, “Looks like it’s time to take a detour.”

“What in the world is going on?” Hitomi asked.

Takako sat in the back seat of the cab, her empty eyes focusing on a point in space. After the confrontation, perhaps as the result of tasting Kuranishi’s blood, her outward vampiric nature had retreated and she had returned to her “normal” demure self.

“Word is, somebody lit off a suitcase nuke in the Toyoma Housing Project.”

“What?”

“Well, that’s just the scuttlebutt. Haven’t you been watching the news?”

“We’ve been—busy.”

“The official announcement from the mayor’s office was that a government satellite fell out of orbit. Not a nuke. But with one of those plutonium generators—enough to make a plenty big-enough mess. Wiped out everybody in there.”

“How horrible! That’s why everybody is wearing masks and those hazmat suits?”

“Yeah, that seems to be the explanation. We’d better head for Mephisto Hospital some other way.”

“Yes, but make it fast.”

“Sure thing,” he said. But the traffic only inched forward.

Even worse, night was falling. And evening rain spotted the windshield. They had to get to Mephisto Hospital *now*. Or else this girl was going to go weird on them again.

The growing sense of dread fired Hitomi’s impatience. Takako was fine for the time being. But if she started turning like she had not too long ago, they’d be in deep shit. Hitomi silently thanked God she’d stuffed a few first aid items into her pockets—the kinds of things that might come in handy for a freelancer covering the more violent side of life.

One other thing goaded her thoughts. The gallant man she had in her back room. The coming of the night signaled his time to leave. Even if he was one of the Toyama kind, she wanted to see him again.

He was the first man to make her heart respond—as a woman—in that way since she’d come to Demon City a decade ago. Enough to make her believe that she had come here if only to meet him.

“Please. Hurry up.” She was on the verge of tears.

A cop waving a red flashlight and wearing a hazmat suit and radiation detector jogged over to them. He was a big man with a barrel chest.

“Shit,” the cabbie complained under his breath. “Last place I want to open the window.” But he did anyway.

“Sorry,” said the sallow-faced cop, in an oddly detached and polite voice.

“Just hurry it up, man. This street’s a parking lot.”

“There’s something I’d like you to listen to.”

“Huh?” He frowned. But he heard it clearly.

Hitomi’s blood ran cold. The sound of a drum.

“You can run, but you can’t hide,” the cop said in a completely different voice. It came from the middle of his chest.

The wide-eyed cabbie watched as the cop unzipped the front of the hazmat suit. And then tore open his belly wide.

Hitomi screamed as the black man poked out, a complacent smile on his face.

“W-what the fuck is that?” cried out the cabbie.

A moment later, his shriek dissolved into a gurgle. The branch of a tree penetrated the car door and jabbed into the cabbie’s solar plexus. Blood erupted from his mouth.

Operating on instinct alone, Hitomi pushed Takako toward the door opposite. “Get out!”

She pulled on the door handle. They tumbled onto the pavement. The car horn blared. And then stopped.

Hitomi got to her feet and pulled Takako up beside her. She scanned the line of stopped cars. It was a one-way street. She looked for any sign of movement. But nothing.

With the dull grating of metal, a dark brown spear punched through the front door, leaving a trail of blood on the ground. The moan of the wind mingled with the sound of the drum. A sound reborn from ancient times, coming forth from the grave to wreak revenge.

Grabbing Takako’s hand, Hitomi set off in the opposite direction. The drum rang in her ears. “I shall get my revenge, even if it takes a whole lifetime. That is my law.”

Chapter Two

Hitomi didn't know where to run to or how to get there. She vaguely remembered walking past a storefront decorated with a garish array of flowers.

When she came back to her senses, they were standing in front of a loud and flashing neon sign. *Disco Trousseau*, the blinking fluorescent characters spelled out.

Hitomi turned around. There was no threatening bouncer. A ticket-collecting booth. She'd lost her wallet and handbag at Kuranishi's place or on the bus. She'd intended to pay the cabbie after she got home.

"Hey, is Motomura-san here?"

Motomura was the manager of the place. The imperturbable lady in the booth betrayed a flicker of recognition.

"You know him?"

"Yeah. I'd like to see him. Tell him it's Takamori."

"Wait here."

The booth lady picked up a nearby phone and spoke in hushed tones as Hitomi cast nervous glances over her shoulder and at Takako. She was reasonably sure that the voodoo assassin wouldn't come after them in a crowded place like this. She would call the cops or the neighborhood security patrol when she got the chance.

The frantic beating of her heart began to slow.

The booth lady put down the phone and looked at them with suspicious eyes. "The manager isn't in today."

"Well, um, could I borrow that phone?"

“There’s a payphone right behind you.”

Hitomi drew herself up and said in a manner that should make it clear she was no casual freeloader, “I lost my purse earlier.”

The booth lady’s response was to look terribly put out.

“Step aside,” someone behind her said. The sound of an irritated fat man.

“Excuse me,” Hitomi answered, getting out of the way.

“Hey, Takamori-chan, is it?”

The voice was that of a savior. The wall of his chest was draped in a bright green polo shirt. A smile graced his block-like head. As it rarely made an appearance on his face, the smile looked a bit strained.

His name was Kanji Inagaki and he was a capo in the local Triad. Two bodyguards accompanied him. At first glance, he looked to be a dignified middle-aged man, but he wasn’t even thirty. Four years ago, gathering material for a story, Hitomi had heard talk about him getting plastic surgery to lend him an additional air of *gravitas*. Running the disco was probably more a hobby than an occupation.

“What are you up to? Still looking for that scoop?”

His kindly voice gave her reason to hope. “We’re on the run from this crazy black man.”

“Black man? What’s he doing here then?” Inagaki looked around him with the eyes of a yazuka. His henchmen grew tense. “Ah, nothing to worry about. I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but he’s not going to try anything funny around here. Come inside. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“No, he’s not that kind of guy. Please. I need to go to the police.”

Inagaki laughed. His massive belly shook like a bowl of jelly. “Quit pulling my leg. You think any cop’s gonna stick his neck out for you? C’mon. Take a load off. And when you have to leave, I’ll have one of my men drive you wherever you need to go.”

“Like I said, he’s not like that. He just ran our cabbie through like on a spit. Didn’t you hear about that?”

“News to me.”

Inagaki gave Hitomi a look. She could tell he was getting a bit pissed off. Here he was trying to help, and she was bitching about this guy. The milk of his human kindness was running dry.

Hitomi gave up. Inagaki sensed it and said, “Good. We’ve all the time in the world. Let’s party!”

He nodded to the booth lady and continued on into the club. There was a large dance hall at the end of the narrow corridor. Two bouncers in T-shirts were guarding the entrance. They both bowed to Inagaki.

Entering the dance hall, the strong smell of aphrodisiacs assaulted her nose. These days, it was a disco in name only. People definitely didn’t go there just to dance and be happy. As in places like Akasaka and Roppongi, the happiness was far more likely to come from the drugs.

“A private room for two” was standard in places like that. When it came to Shinjuku, though, a customer could expect to find not only private rooms equipped with the latest sex machines, but “dream rooms” designed for the abuse of hallucinogenic drugs that could seriously put his life in jeopardy.

Disco Trousseau was famous for all that, and especially its unique “music services.”

One entire wall of the establishment was given over to the band, all of whom were stoners in serious need of medical attention.

Before escorting them to their tables, the maître d’ gave them all mood stabilizers. Hitomi ended up taking ten pills altogether. Otherwise the assault on her senses would put her at extreme risk. Inagaki and his men couldn’t afford to let down their guard either.

Given the means and the opportunity, an attack could be underway right now, even inside the club. Hitomi was losing confidence in her ability to make it through the night awake and alert and not in Inagaki’s bed.

Before being seated, the yakuza were already high. “Today’s shit is the real deal.”

Despite the beta blockers, Inagaki speech was slurring, the muscles in his face and neck softening. The result of the narcotics dispersed through the air. Inagaki's bodyguards were the same.

"She's not a very friendly one," Inagaki said, looking at Takako's face.

"She got worked over by one of those Toyama vamps," Hitomi said.

The yakuza backed away. Inagaki hooked his forefingers and stuck them over his mouth like a pair of fangs. "A bride of Dracula, eh? Scary. You're collecting some fine story material here. Hey, let's dance. These two will look after the girl. Relax. These are my handpicked guys. Plenty of combat experience and packing heat. Could take out a hundred as easily as ten. Some crazy stalker is as much a challenge as picking their teeth."

"He's not like that."

"Give it a rest. C'mon." He took her elbow with his mitt-like hand and led her onto the dance floor.

The floor—that could hold a hundred people comfortably—was buried in humanity. The band was pounding out the music in eight-beat measures. The people dancing, however, were pretty much following the beat of their individual drummers. At least nobody was simply flailing with their arms and legs and grinding their hips in the ordinary manner.

Hands and wrists and arms turned as if every joint was double-jointed. Heads did a full three-sixty on their necks. Like their bodies had been deboned. Some coiled their rubbery legs beneath them and moved their upper bodies in a weird sort of snake dance.

Those who wanted to stand out on the dance floor could get a makeover from a back-alley doctor for a few hundred bucks. This was the result. And with television producers from outside Shinjuku coming to Demon City in search of the new and the unusual, their prices would probably be going up.

The musical performance changed. A four-beat drum rhythm. A guitar riff that bit into the bones. The devil-may-care movements began to syncopate themselves with the band.

Hitomi felt a slight sense of vertigo. Something weird was happening in her

semicircular canals. And she knew why.

It was because of the music. The melody the stoner musicians were weaving contained within it the echoes of madness. Producing this other-dimensional music, their hands moved faster than the eye could see. The skin split apart, blood erupted in a mist, blue smoke and the smell of burning flesh burst from their hands.

The floor tilted and swayed. Hitomi closed her eyes and braced her knees to keep from falling over. Screams echoed around the room. People fell like dominoes on the floor—that wasn't in fact moving at all. Hitomi had taken plenty of the mood stabilizers. The impact on those who came here to get buzzed on purpose must be exceeding their wildest imaginations.

A girl with a pony tail pushed at the air like a mime as she writhed on the floor. Hands and feet stamped out the rhythm of the dance. The movement became painful, as if they had to hold up the ceiling like Atlas bearing the world on his back.

A bald man with a United Nations of flags tattooed on his skull violently retched. The blue-white vomit sparkled and fluoresced and assumed the shape of a human being and stood up.

This wasn't a dream or hallucination. It was an instant living thing concocted out of the drugs he'd downed by the wickedly possessing music. A creation of the music, it began moving, however clumsily, in time with the rhythm.

"Wonderful!" growled a voice in her ear.

It was Inagaki. He cackled in hoarse laughter. And at some point, he had seized a large-caliber automatic in his right hand, and a foot-long short sword in his left. He laughed again, and pointed the gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. One of the light show laser lights burst into flame. Fiery gray lumps rained down on their heads. Cries and screams. But nobody ran away. The madness had infected the entire hall.

Hitomi felt a sharp pain on her shoulder and sank to her knees. A scrawny kid in a tank top and hot pants was standing there, an electric whip in his hand.

"Son of a bitch!" Inagaki bellowed. Before the kid could strike again, his left

hand flashed. That he hadn't used the gun was proof that a particle of sanity remained.

The blade sliced down to the bone. The startled kid put his left hand to his cheek and licked the blood from his fingers. "Shit!"

Inagaki had returned the sword to the sheath at his side when another sound crept into Hitomi's senses. She didn't want to believe it, but it was the sound of a drum.

The band increased the volume and tempo of their play. The laser light destroyed by Inagaki's shot continued to scatter shards of light around the room, striking the skin like a match flame. A mere graze scalded like a bad rope burn.

Hitomi craned her ears. The drumbeat was still there. Worse, when she put her hands over her ears, away from the outward noise, it was slowly growing stronger.

She spread out her hands. "Stop it! I don't want to hear it!"

But the crashing tsunami of sound wasn't there at all. Everybody stopped moving.

Hitomi glanced around her with concerned eyes. "What's going on?" she asked Inagaki.

"Dunno. You hearing that weird sound?"

Hitomi didn't answer. There wasn't any need to. They all could.

Tan—Tan—Tan

Tan—Tan—Tan

The low, low sound of the drum. Now everybody was glancing around. They all felt the strange vibe, the whispered sorcery.

"Interesting fucker." Inagaki brought the knife to his mouth and licked the blade, still stained with the blood of the kid in the tank top. The blood coated his lips and tongue.

The primeval echoes now ruled one corner of Demon City. A thunderous roar tore through the club. The pounding of the drums. The rumble of the bass. The

wail of the sax.

It had turned into a battle of the bands.

“Bring it on!” somebody yelled. A war cry.

“Let’s do this! Never say die!”

“Yeah, drown out that pissy little drum!”

“Eat our dust!”

Another roar crashed like thunder. Fire flashed from Inagaki’s right hand. The bark of the gun punched black holes in the floor. As if the retort of the Magnum made the blood roil, the dancing and shouting reached a frenetic pace.

But Hitomi listened. And everybody heard.

Tan—Tan—Tan

Tan—Tan—Tan

The sound was definitely coming closer. A girl standing next to the wall suddenly arched her back. Her already large breasts seemed to swell inside her blouse. And then with another thrust, a bloody tree limb burst through the fabric.

Standing next to her, her boyfriend should have realized the branch had jabbed through solid concrete, but was so high the danger never dawned on him. The tree limb stabbed forward, skewering through the girl and five more in front of her.

Hitomi grasped the unfolding situation and shouted, “Inagaki-san! Do something!”

“What?” Inagaki whirled around. Despite the opium den atmosphere, his fighting instincts canceled out his intoxication. He was yakuza to the core.

The branch swerved. It had caught sight of Hitomi. The smell of blood filled the air.

“What the *fuck*!”

Inagaki raised his gun. The boom of the shot. The recoil-dampened .45 Magnum jumped in his hand. Two of the four bullets blew limbs off of the branch, and then hit a young man behind it, killing him instantly.

Hardly anybody noticed. Because the drum perfectly echoed the fifth shot.

The severed end of the branch squirmed toward Hiromi. Inagaki pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The slide of the gun stuck open. The magazine was empty. He jumped into the air, focusing the full force of the descending weight of his body on his sword.

The edge bit into the wood. The branch writhed. The point of contact slipped. The steel blade came to a halt halfway through. The jagged end lunged at her. Hitomi didn't have time to move out of the way.

She felt a sharp pressure below her left breast. And then it went away.

She cast her eyes about for some cause of the branch's strained retreat. The drum sang out. A metallic sound. Following by the crash of the keyboards in an ecstatic clash of chords.

The mad sounds of the stoners assaulted the branch. The reverberations of the drum disappeared. Hitomi shouted and waved wildly at the bandstand. But they were immersed in their music and didn't hear her.

As if in response, the drummer raised his right hand. He threw his shoulders back. A black snake crawled out of his chest.

The enemy had figured it out as well.

"Run!"

Hitomi's yell was swallowed up by the scream of the vocalist. Another limb had singled out his abdomen. The saxophonist bent backwards. The bassist stumbled forward, clinging to his instrument. A branch bored through the wooden body, plucking at the strings.

The music died, replaced by a different sound.

Tan—Tan—

Tan—Tan—

"Get out of here!" Inagaki shouted at the surrounding booths.

He headed for the exits, ignoring Hitomi and his henchmen. To his right and left, the branches speared dark silhouettes like paper dolls. Hitomi headed for the

seats where Takako was sitting next to two yakuza underlings.

The dance hall filled with tortured screams.

“Let’s go!”

Hitomi grabbed Takako by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet. She heard a sound and looked at the yakuza, at the skinny one’s chest. Another torso unfolded out of his chest like a black flower. The body toppled over. The black man sat there instead and flashed a white smile.

His hands continued to pound on the drum.

Hitomi looked at the table. At the wine bottle and glasses and hors d’oeuvres—covered with blood. She picked up the bottle and threw it with all her might. Fear multiplied that by a good three times.

The bottle hit the back of the chair, scattering its contents in all directions.

The black man vanished. Hitomi started to turn around to see where he went when she felt an additional weight on her shoulders.

Tan—Tan—

Tan—Tan—

Coming from the top of her head. The small man perched on her shoulders like a child and continued his performance.

Chapter Three

Hitomi was seized with panic.

She grabbed his legs and screamed. He proved unusually light. She lifted him up and slammed him down on the table.

A dull thud and the table shook.

The black man braced himself with both hands on the tabletop—like doing a pushup—and then pushed down and sprang up with remarkable force. As Hitomi jerked back her hand, he did a full back flip and landed on the floor as gracefully as an Olympic gymnast sticking a vault.

“Do you want to die here?” he asked with genuine curiosity. “Or go on running your whole life?”

Clearly it was not the taking of revenge on behalf of his friend that brought him pleasure, but the revenge itself.

“Then kill me,” Hitomi shouted at him, her body trembling. “Kill me now. I’m tired of these games.”

“Very well then.”

His words syncopated with the beat of the drum. The cries echoing through the hall had died out, replaced by low moans.

“But the one I will kill—is her. You say you want to die. Therefore I will let you live. Watch as I slaughter your friend before your eyes. Suffer until you die. Suffer—”

Hitomi yelled and sprang at him. He nimbly leapt back several yards and was about to strike from the drum a particular note—

A pair of willowy arms reached over his shoulder and grasped his wrist.

Hitomi had never seen her before. Where in the world had she come from? She was draped like a white shadow over the black man's back. A second later, the shadow had turned into a flesh and blood woman. The same sex as Hitomi, but possessed of a beauty that was an ecstatic shock to the senses.

Hitomi didn't know her from Eve. But this carnal princess had sensed Takako's presence and arrived in the nick of time.

"It does not matter who you are. When the sun goes down, she will always come back to me."

Her voice only deepened Hitomi's dazed intoxication. The Demon Princess was reproaching the African drummer. What was the source of such emotions?

"Knowing that she was being pursued by persons unknown and was afraid for her life, I was forced to come to this seedy establishment. Though it does have a lovely aroma about it, doesn't it? But forcing me to come here for any reason is an unforgivable sin."

She seized his wrist and held it, though it was clear that she was exerting no additional force. Nevertheless, he forgot all about his demon drum. His body stiffened, as if she had taken a firm hold on his soul.

"You tried to kill her. I cannot allow that. If you wish to kill her, you must kill me first." The Demon Princess released him and walked over to Takako and stood in front of her, paying Hitomi no mind. The little drummer stood there rooted to the spot.

"Well then," she said. "Come on." And she beckoned with her hand.

As if drawn by her invitation, his hands moved up and down in front of his chest. There was no change in the steady beat. After several seconds, a rending sound—heavy but yet faint—welled up around the Demon Princess's feet.

Hitomi furrowed her brows.

The Demon Princess didn't appear perturbed in the least. She looked down and said, "Interesting." A teasing light glowed in her eyes. "Alas, what is this but a frivolous peek into your world? I have confronted enemies armed with the roots of far larger and sturdier trees. During the Ming Dynasty, I took in an entire stone pillar. I have seen such wood before, in that distant dark continent known

as Africa. How shall we proceed? You will show me a good time, I hope."

Tan—A single beat rang out.

The Demon Princess seemed to pout. The brown limb of a tree parted her seductive red lips. Hitomi's eyes grew as wide as saucers. The rumbling sound in the floor, the man's wooden tools—had shattered the concrete, stabbed her between her legs, pierced her internal organs and thrust out her mouth.

Hitomi knew the pleasures of being so violated. Kuranishi's pride was comprehensible in its perverseness. Then why would he deliver unto such a rare beauty such a heartless death?

She understood quickly enough.

Princess's pale hand calmly took hold of the limb accosting her mouth. "I suppose the purpose of this tree is to rape women."

The branch filled her mouth, but her voice rang out with the clear tones of the infamous koto *Silent Night*.

"But it can do the same to men!"

The limb flew from her mouth like a rope. The man backed away with his drum. He'd gone five steps when a spasm stopped him in his tracks. The coffee-colored branch ran from Princess's mouth to the bottom of his shorts.

This living dildo from hell, the creation of the mad scientist and the witch doctor, penetrated the only asshole his creator had endowed him with.

He yelped. And then moaned in stark and obvious pleasure. Princess brought her hand to her mouth and smiled bewitchingly. "Hoh! It is *that* effective! Then you and it should spend the rest of your lives together. Like this—"

The branch bored in deeper.

The man's howls were lost in a flurry of footsteps. The door burst open and men in blue poured into the dance hall. The disco was rigged with cameras and monitors and other crime prevention measures. Somebody in the security room must have called the cops.

The bouncers guarding the door were flat on their backs. The Demon City cops had their guns out and aimed at the Demon Princess, hiding their obvious

confusion as they shouted, “Freeze!”

Spotting the black man with a tree limb coming out of his ass, the sergeant barked, “All right, lady, you got five seconds to pull it out or we start shooting.”

The Demon Princess closed her mouth, biting down with no more force than eating cotton candy. The severed end dropped to the floor. “Happy?” she asked the sergeant. He was an unusually handsome cop for Demon City. She said, “Perhaps you would indulge a request of mine, then? I would like your blood.”

In response to the point-blank demand, the sergeant furrowed his brows and exchanged glances with the officers on either side of him.

The Demon Princess didn’t wait for an answer. She stepped forward. At this point, it was unlikely that Takako was still foremost on her mind.

The sergeant’s associates reacted first. “Hold it right there!” They weren’t patient men. The roar of their guns came a second later. The lines of fire pierced Princess’s chest and exited out her back. One round grazed Hitomi’s forehead.

Before the sergeant could squeeze the trigger on his gun, Princess’s hand reached for his throat. In the moment that her fingers closed, all reason vanished from his head, replaced by unrequited lust.

His associates’ guns continued to fire. In two seconds, six bullets perforated her body as her mouth closed on his throat.

“Let him go, bitch!”

Their Magnums that could fell a grizzly bear had no effect on her. The one on the right didn’t pause to puzzle this out and threw himself at her, pistol-whipping her with all his might, in a murderous rage. A clear case of police brutality.

There was no reaction from her at all. The sensation of striking her soft flesh and bones. She just stood there.

“What the—!”

The other cop shouldered his gun and slammed his nightstick against her stomach. The kind of blow that would have laid a much bigger man out flat, if not permanently disable him. She didn’t budge. And the handsome young sergeant’s face lost its color.

The nightstick hummed through the air. The gun barrel was a blur of gray steel. At some point she let go of the sergeant. Faster than they realized this—or noticed he had turned into a wax-like corpse—she spun around as they continued to beat her.

The hair covering half of her face brushed away. The horrifying sight of the charred side of her face froze the cops in their tracks.

"I simply cannot abide having my meals interrupted by such clamoring rudeness. That is more than deserving of a death sentence. I could take your blood, but the thought makes me sick. A pig's death for the pigs."

Her white hand flashed. With a sound like a stuck hinge, their heads spun around on their necks. And then the flesh tore apart. Twirling like a pair of tops, they lifted into the air, the tips of the tree branches growing out of the floor embedded in the neck bones like drills. And soon enough came to a halt.

"Good blood," she said, referring to the young sergeant. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "But a taste of sweetest wine in Heaven awaits in my castle." She said to Takako, "Let us be on our way."

Takako nodded her pale face. Hitomi watched dumbfounded as Takako followed Princess to the door. She was at a complete loss for words. There was no worthy comparison to be made between the African and *that* woman. Hitomi would not be the first or the last to call her existence a miracle.

A burly head lay there. Her feet wouldn't move. The door closed and the two women disappeared from view.

"What the hell's going on there? Answer me, Oda!"

From the walkie-talkie on the hip of the desiccated sergeant came the rebuke of his superior officer.

"Aki-san."

He didn't trust his senses sufficiently to believe the voice calling his name was anything but an auditory hallucination. But it sounded familiar.

He was in a room in the Demon Princess's manor house. Yakou had brought him there without Kikiou's knowledge. Try any funny stuff and Takako—

Princess would surely have her hands on her by now—would suffer for it. His one-time good friend was nowhere to be found here.

He could be eagerly filling Kikiou in on all the details at that very moment.

The room appeared to be a modest servant's quarters. He'd laid down on the Spartan bed and took a nap. The quiet voice awoke him—three hours later, by his reckoning.

"Aki-san."

The person was on the other side of the wooden door. He sensed her presence.

"Who is it?" he responded softly.

"It's Takako."

"Who?"

"The pretend Takako—that Kikiou told me to come and lure you away."

Setsura drew his brows. He'd left her at the bottom of the stairs when he'd gone up to the roof of the manor house. He didn't know what happened to her after that. He hadn't been particularly concerned about her fate. Assuming she wasn't lying about who she was, then Kikiou hadn't reproached her in a life-threatening manner.

"How did you know I was here?" he wondered.

"I just happened to see the two of you come in."

"Does Kikiou know?"

"No. I haven't set eyes on him since being told by him to get you and leave. He's probably forgotten all about me. Even what he put in my heart."

Setsura stretched, and said, "Come in. It's not locked."

A moment of hesitation. Setsura waved his right hand. The door opened.

Yakou hadn't taken his devil wire, so there would have been no sense in locking the door. Its sub-micron dimensions made it as good as invisible, allowing several pounds to be slipped inside the skin through the slightest break in the skin. He must have abandoned the thought of disarming him from the start.

She closed the door behind her, a firm expression on her face. It was certainly "Takako." Whether the real or the fake, he couldn't tell. Knowing Kikiou, there could be thousands of her doubles about.

He wouldn't need a reason. He'd do it for the hell of it.

"You doing okay?" Setsura asked unexpectedly.

"Yes," said Takako, lowering her eyes.

Setsura offered her a chair. "What should I call you?"

"Whatever you wish. But if you wouldn't mind—"

"Yes?"

"Takako."

"Sure."

"I don't know any other name."

"I understand," he said breezily.

Pretend Takako raised her eyes and gave him a funny look. "You're awfully agreeable."

"How's that?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Oh," Setsura said with a blank look. "So, what are you here for?"

"I—um—" She hesitated. "I was going to come here to help you, but seeing that the door is unlocked, I assume you must be here of your own accord."

"No way," Setsura said, though he certainly didn't appear to be being held against his will, making for a curious oxymoron.

"Then—under what circumstances—?"

"No need to bore you with all the details. In any case, are you the same Takako from before?"

"You don't think so? That is understandable, though."

"No. But you are Kikiou's creation. And still you came to help me?"

“I’m not lying,” Takako answered point blank. “He must have abandoned me before because he took note of my true character. I don’t know when it surfaced, but I don’t think it was because I found myself in a safe place. It may sound old-fashioned, but I owe a debt to the person who, knowing my true self, stepped into Kikiou-sama’s trap on purpose.”

“It was nothing,” Setsura said with a wave of the hand. “No. Think nothing of it.” And then with more intensity, “But would you know anything about a garden the mistress of the house keeps out back?”

“I do.”

“Do you know of any obnoxious obstacles on the way there?”

“I don’t,” she said, sadly shaking her head. “I do not know anything more than the real Takako-san would.”

“That’s okay. Well, you’d better be on your way.”

“But if there is anything you need to know from Kikiou-sama, I could ask him. Just tell me what you want to know.”

“I’ll be fine,” Setsura said. Though he knew in his heart that the wrong response was written all over his face.

“No, please. I know I can’t be of great use to you, but if it’s not too much of a reach, I should be able to do it. Or don’t you trust me?”

“There is that,” Setsura readily admitted.

Whether he was being blunt or insensitive could be debated. Either way, tears welled up in Pretend Takako’s eyes and perhaps aroused in him pangs of human kindness.

“Simply taking a stroll in this world means risking your life,” he explained.

“That’s fine with me. There must be some way I can help you.”

“Not if you’re dead. And no one will notice when you’re gone.”

“I am only a facsimile. Kikiou-sama couldn’t be bothered to find me. Whether I’m here or not, it makes no difference. In that case, I want to do something for the person who did care that I existed.”

Setsura sighed. It was clear to him that the feelings of Pretend Takako were real. “Are you familiar with the moon lily?” he asked with unusual gravity.

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard it blooms in the back garden. If it’s okay with you, I would like a bouquet.”

“Yes.”

“But promise me this—if you sense danger about, stop and run away. And don’t come back.”

Pretend Takako looked straight at Setsura. An indescribable expression colored her face and quickly vanished. “I will return. I promise.”

Setsura watched as she stood up and slipped softly down the hall. Unseen by anyone, a shadow passed across his fair countenance.

A look of remorse even.

Part Thirteen: Dance of the Demoness

Chapter One

The atrocity that occurred that night in a corner of Shinjuku was not by the city's standards that big of a deal. According to eyewitnesses though, the beauty of the assailant exceeded not only that of a certain *senbei* shop owner in West Shinjuku, but the director of Mephisto Hospital as well.

On those qualifications alone, the perpetrator was destined to be forever remembered in the city's history.

Three patrol cars were dispatched to the disco near Okubo station. Together with three additional SWAT members, the total came to nine. Three died inside the club. The remaining six were killed in the following melee outside.

According to the eyewitnesses, the assailant was "a woman whose beauty made the rest of the world pale by comparison." And it took her barely twenty seconds to dispatch those police officers to the great beyond.

Several seconds passed between her appearance and the cops ordering her to raise her hands. Her beauty literally blinded them. There was a younger girl with her. The assailant told her to stand there and advanced on the police alone.

She was ordered to stop twice. And then they opened fire with handguns and shotguns and full automatics. The full, naked fury of the attack against this frail-looking woman was remarked upon by several witnesses.

"Just looking at her from the back was enough to set your hair on end."

And no wonder. Forty-two shotgun blasts, 268 5.56 mm high velocity rounds, three full seconds of laser radiation—none of it had the slightest effect.

Standing in the withering barrage, the beauty didn't budge an inch.

The carnage commenced thereafter. The evidence describing how six strong men met their maker was inconclusive to say the least. The reason—again,

according to statements from those on the scene—was the woman moved so fast as to become invisible at times.

One witness recorded that, “It didn’t take three seconds after she moved her right hand.” Another said that, “It was over two seconds after she moved her left.” A third said that it was, “A couple seconds after she raised both arms.”

Based on this testimony—killing all in no more than three or four seconds by ripping their heads off—she must possess superhuman power or artificial limbs.

“She was covered in blood. I never would have believed blood could look so lovely. I could well imagine people becoming serial killers in devotion to her, simply in order to experience that sensation again.”

After the carnage was completed, she and the other woman left on foot toward Shokuan Avenue.

As they approached the ruins of Kio Shrine, shadows descended out of the darkness and surrounded Princess and Takako. Wearing body armor and laser goggles and levitation belts, their appearance brought to mind astronauts or industrial robots.

Bright beams illuminated the two from all directions, the light becoming a part of her own natural luster. The two continued on in the glare of the searchlights as if nothing had happened. Not even a blink.

Hovering two feet off the ground, the soldiers surrounding her didn’t move. The Demon Princess raised her right hand toward the large man directly in front of her.

“Wait,” said a thin but youthful voice above their heads.

Her fingers together, Princess jabbed her hand out in front of her. Not so much in a pique of anger or emotion, but rather a spur-of-the-moment action.

Armor that could withstand a 140 mm rocket crumpled like cardboard. Princess kept on going, clenching her right hand as she walked along, piercing the Adam’s apple of the operator inside, and pushing it out the back of the armored suit.

The electrical energy wrapped her hand like a glowing violet glove, then

enveloped the dead soldier. She yanked back her hand. The armored suit collapsed on the ground, twitching in its death throes, twinkling here and there like a child's sparkler.

"Wait. I'm Takeshi Jinnai, group leader of Joint Operational Forces under the Ministry of Defense Central Command." He introduced himself without attempting to hide the awe in his voice. "General Bey thought we would find you here. The general wishes an audience with you."

The Princess finally came to a halt and looked up. "Where are you?"

"Come along and you will understand."

"I am not in a mood to waste time. Tell him this—an eternal punishment of fire and brimstone awaits the traitor."

"How about serving up that punishment here first?"

The Demon Princess glanced at the three remaining armored soldiers. "It is all the same to me. Your move."

The heads of the armored units sang out. The built-in laser cannons linked up and aimed at Princess's head and chest. Three beams lit up her gossamer figure in a brilliant red light.

The black night and the pure white and the ruby red—inside the dazzling fusion, two more incandescent points blazed into being. A million times redder than the reddest flame.

The eyes of the Demon Princess.

Inside their armor, the sudden shock penetrated the depths of the soldiers' brains. For a second, they froze. In that second, Princess flew at them, a mad demon dance through the moonlight. The slash of her slender hand divided the armored suit on her left from the head down to the waist and threw him at the soldier directly in front of her.

He didn't have time to react as his colleague flew through the air at him. At the moment of impact, the suit disintegrated like a dry reed and the electromagnetic energy from its high-power battery pack engulfed both, killing them instantly.

The soldier on the right suddenly shot upwards, trying to flee from this

accursed hand while continuing to fire. As Princess's face absorbed the light, she brandished that hand. The luminescing energy reversed course precisely, penetrated the lens of the cannon, and shot off into distant space.

The armored suit reached an altitude of fifteen hundred feet before the helmet burned out, severing the cannon's energy feed. It would be another hour before the levitation unit would exhaust its reserves. The summer night sky was all his until then.

"So the general wasn't lying after all," said the voice from the heavens. "Lieutenant Matthews said the same. But I could not imagine such a disparity in power. We only want a moment of your time. We have no desire to fight you any further. But if we could shift your attention in a different direction—"

Princess narrowed her eyes to slits. "A different direction?"

"The girl with you. According to General Bey, she is very important to you. And yet she has not been turned completely. Light off a tactical nuke here, and while you might be spared, she most certainly would not."

Princess didn't answer, and that was answer enough.

"We are currently hovering at an altitude of five hundred meters. It'd take a warhead a second and a half. You might escape the first blast, but the second and the third? I don't think so. I'll only say this—you appear to possess no compassion for the lives of others, but do not imagine yourself alone in that. We would happily incinerate this town in order to get to you."

The Demon Princess looked back at Takako. The rage in her eyes at that moment made ordinary hatred look like love in comparison. And just as quickly cooled. Perhaps the face of a certain young man had passed through her thoughts.

"Fine," agreed the four-thousand-year-old woman. Her voice could have turned the summer air to frost. "I shall go wherever you wish. But let me make myself clear. Take me to a place I do not wish to go, with purposes in mind not agreeable to me, and you will regret it. Or rather, you will not live long enough to regret it."

A moment of silence followed. "Then we'll make sure we don't do that. Just to

ensure that you don't change your mind."

Jinnai spoke in calmer tones, though the expression on his face remained a mystery. In any case, his name might well be recorded in the history books as the second person to twist Princess's will to his own.

The patient was wracked by disquiet. The pain in his gut grew worse, but he hadn't seen hide nor hair of the only doctor he could trust since the night before. Though he ended up being examined in the ER, the doctors were thoroughly unsympathetic.

"This is receiving for the psychic phenomena ward. A large-scale case of spiritual possession broke out at the remains of the Chuo General Hospital in the Hyakunin district. We've got our hands full. You'll just have to wait until the hospital director and deputy director return."

"Quit joking around! I'm in pain here! I've already been examined by every doctor who pretends to know something! That's why I came here! Even talking hurts! Hurry up and do something about it!"

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing else we can do. Like I told you, we're shorthanded right now. Relax. Your life isn't in danger. Nor will it be for the next day or two. But the people affected by this business in Hyakunin have their bodies and souls on the line. Hold on until tomorrow and I'm sure the director will be back by then. Do the best you can until then."

"Where is the director?" the man shouted in exasperation. He moaned. "I had two needle-like objects extracted from my abdomen. But painkillers or hypnotism don't have any effect on the pain and nobody knows why. The army hospital said it must be a spiritual or psychological malady and recommended I come here. You can't just throw suffering patients out on the street. Wait until the press finds out!"

"The press *outside* Shinjuku," the doctor said with unfeigned sympathy.

The philosophy at Mephisto Hospital stressed the patient above all other concerns. However, that meant patients with real, treatable sicknesses.

"I can understand if it hasn't sunk in yet—but this city and Japan aren't the same thing. The Japanese press and the Shinjuku press aren't the same thing. The

latter are much more cooperative when it comes to institutions such as this one."

"That a threat?" the man blustered in a low voice. His ability to cow the toughest soldier hadn't flagged in the least.

The doctor shrugged it off. "Mr. McRae, this hospital—" At that moment, the cell phone clipped to his sleeve vibrated and a green light flashed. He smiled. "Just a second. I believe we may have an answer for you. The wings of the night have borne Doctor Mephisto back to us."

Several minutes later, Mr. McRae was lying on a bed in an examination room, about to be treated by the Hospital Director himself.

"I've looked at your charts," said the most handsome doctor in the world.

His head was bowed, so unfortunately McRae couldn't see him clearly. The hellish pains radiating through his abdomen magically disappeared whenever Doctor Mephisto looked him in the eyes.

Nevertheless, McRae felt as if a strange coolness, like an autumn frost, had wrapped its arms around him.

"According to your charts, on the other days the previous hospital removed several blonde nylon hairs such as those used in the manufacture of dolls."

"Yeah. The other doc said that too. But I haven't the slightest idea when or how something like that happened. I would have noticed it. I wouldn't even be able to walk!"

"The cause aside, that the symptoms have not disappeared after being treated suggests not physical pain but a grudge, a curse, regrets. Is there anyone with reason to bear malice toward you?"

The calm, even voice made him shiver despite himself. "No. Absolutely nothing like that," said McRae, shaking his craggy face back and forth. His vehement denials caused him so much pain that he had to bury his face in the sheets and clutch the edge of the mattress.

"The pain will soon go away. In any case, I have to wonder who treated you previously. He did a splendid job."

"A hospital with connections to state security. I may not look it, but I am

Japanese.”

“So you work for the Foreign Office. We shall admit you to the hospital presently.”

“No can do. And with that in mind, I’ve already overstayed my welcome. Whatever treatment I receive here today, it’ll have to be on an outpatient basis.”

“How about that—a patient with a lack of patience,” said Mephisto, displaying a sense of humor very much unlike him. He touched McRae’s stomach with his fingers. McRae drew in his breath sharply. “Does it hurt?”

“No. But your fingers are very cold.”

“I beg your forgiveness.” Mephisto withdrew his hand.

McRae’s blue eyes opened wide. “It doesn’t hurt at all! It’s like a dream!”

“Post-surgical care will not be required. If pressed to arrive at a diagnosis, I would say that you incurred the ill will of another.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. The Demon Physician is as good as his reputation. I’ve seen him perform a miracle with my own eyes. I’m really thankful.”

He shook Mephisto’s hand over and over, then got dressed and left. The door closed behind him and the examination room fell silent.

“A foreign member of Japan’s civil service,” Mephisto said to himself. “Stabbed by the golden hair of a doll. Whatever could he be in a hurry about?” He hit the intercom switch. “This is the director. What is the condition of the men who recently arrived here?”

“As you diagnosed,” answered the dean of internal medicine in a brisk, businesslike manner. He was a man whose opinion Mephisto could trust. “It appears to be severe blood loss.” He lowered his voice. “The customary examination revealed no unusual internal damage. However, the marks on their necks suggest a vampire attack.”

“The Toyama vampires are no more,” Mephisto said coldly. So the news about the atomic blast had reached his ears.

“These were recent wounds. Do you know of any other sources?” the dean asked softly. “We haven’t seen the victim of a vampire attack in this hospital for

years. There are rumors about that creatures afraid of the sunlight are multiplying. A friend of mine at the police hospital says that a few days ago, a Kawadacho Rejuvenation Committee gangbanger was admitted, his body riddled with .357 Magnum and .45 rounds. And yet continued to live."

"When the night comes, those are the kinds of rumors the wind carries with it. This is Demon City, after all."

"That's for sure."

"I'll leave them to your care."

"Understood."

Mephisto hung up and leaned back in the armchair. He looked up at the ceiling. With a flash of his ring, the lights dimmed. His comely countenance floated here in the dark. There were no doubt poets in this city who, passing by him on a moonlit night, would slit their wrists on the spot and write sonnets to his beauty with their own blood.

Gazing upon the pale physician now, what would such a bard have to say? The Demon Physician rested his hands on his knees and locked his fingers together and smiled and laughed softly.

A gentle, heavenly smile that showed a pair of white fangs.

Chapter Two

Hitomi Takamori returned to her mushroom house half an hour after the Disco Trousseau Massacre.

Her heart felt like it had beat itself to a pulp. Her stomach felt as if she had swallowed a lump of lead. That she'd been able to hail a taxi was amazing enough. That she'd managed to retrieve the fare from her desk and collect the change was a miracle.

She'd witnessed the slaughter in front of the club. In the face of all that blood and human carnage, her budding journalistic spirit died.

What was she doing getting involved with a woman like that? And the man who had led the girl to her abode—the girl who had gone off with that woman—what manner of man was he?

They must be one and the same.

The face of that strong, silent man rose up in her thoughts. As did the unbelievable conclusions. But he must be different. She could not have become entranced by a man who had anything to do with the likes of *her*.

The tragic series of events that had begun the night before were taking their toll on her spirit. She'd returned home in order to pose the question to him, and that itself was beyond perverse.

The taxi left and she stood alone in front of the door. She had to go in. Now she felt the fear. She hadn't the time to check when she'd retrieved the fare, but had felt no human presence deeper in.

These creatures of the night were unlikely to linger about when night came. She ran after the taxi. Its taillights were just turning the corner. It couldn't wait and it wouldn't come back. For the first time, Hitomi was seeing the true colors of the night.

She stood there for a while. Her body trembled once. A bird sang out in the night air.

She walked quickly to the door, opened it, and stepped inside. Without stopping, she proceeded from the foyer through the kitchen and placed her hand on the door and slid it open.

Darkness filled the room the way water fills a glass. Touching it seemed to send ripples through the gloom. The light switch was by the door. She reached out, almost in a daze. She was afraid her fingers were going to close around some strange object, but they reached the switch unimpeded.

Light filled the small room.

A man was there. The same place she had left him in the morning, the same position, lying on his back.

There was only one thing—no, two things—different. First, the blanket was pulled down to his waist. Second—and now Hitomi let out a small scream—a black stake grew out of the left side of Ryuuki's chest. Its black gleam boasted its sickening gravity as it sunk into his heart.

A steel stake.

Hitomi's thoughts shouted at her to *run*. She spun around. The sliding door slammed shut in front of her face. She tried to open it but it wouldn't budge. She looked down at the jamb and saw a streak of white dust. Earlier, not even Galeen Nuvenberg had taken note of it.

She touched it with the tip of her finger. It blew into her face, into her eyes. It stung fiercely and made her gasp. She bent over in pain.



The pain went away. The dust had retreated. Ryuuki's body lay there.

She turned to the door. A gray stab of pain assaulted her retinas. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the ceiling. Her vision cleared. She poised herself and leapt toward the door. She was blinded before she reached it.

Hitomi attempted to escape two more times before it became clear that the dust was commanding her—to focus her attention on Ryuuki.

"What do you want?" she cried, throwing her arms out in supplication. "He's dead. What am I supposed to do about it?"

The dust danced in front of her face. Then swirled down and gathered around the stake.

"You want me to remove it?"

The dust scattered around the circumference of his body. If she removed the stake and brought him back to life, that could constitute a betrayal of the human race.

Hitomi looked down at him. A countenance that bespoke the distillation of the feral and the civilized in countless trials and tribulations remained calmly unchanged on this cruel deathbed.

And she realized how becalmed her own spirit was. This was Demon City, after all, the city where every creature, no matter how ugly and repulsive, had the right to live and let live. Didn't the citizens of this city have an equal duty to protect the rights of the vampires as much as those of anybody else?

The conviction welled up inside her—*this man is different*. He was a different species from that of the cold, merciless vampire demon favored in the movies.

Even the dust stirs itself to protect him.

Her conscience clear, Hitomi grasped the stake. The black-red blood around its base was hard and dry. She knelt and yanked up with all her might. It resisted at first, and then slipped out.

She fell back on her behind, the stake in her hands. She cast it aside and approached him. She touched his pale face. There was no reaction. She touched his hands. They were cold. There was no pulse.

How was she supposed to revive him? Her state of exhaustion robbed her of her strength. She put a hand on the floor and took a ragged breath.

Tan—The sound rang in her ears. But she couldn't make it out.

Tan—Tan—

Tan—Tan—Tan—

Her blood thrummed to the beat. The man with a tree up his ass. She'd assumed he was dead and thought no more about him. *It wasn't possible*. He was alive and had followed her back here—

Hitomi ran to the window. The curtains were closed. She hesitated. And then pulled them open. The grounds in front of her house were filled with moonlight. The small figure was sitting cross-legged in the center of the lot. It could have easily been mistaken for a passing shadow. But the shadow sat on a slab of concrete beating his drum.

"Help me—" Hitomi whispered. No other words came to mind. "Help me—"

She backed away from the window and turned around. Ryuuki was standing not more than a foot behind her.

"Ah—" A cry of fear and joy. Her heart could not decide which emotion to settle on. The next second, she forgot all about the accursed drum. She clung to him as if in a dream. "Thank God. You're alive. Thank God."

His large hand touched her cheek. Hitomi wasn't afraid anymore. She raised her head.

"Stop—" said the voice above her, a voice filled with pathos. "Stop—Shuuran—I owe this person my life."

This person? Who was he referring to? She touched his rugged, sturdy chest, unconsciously feeling for the wound, stiff with congealed blood. What remained of the blood that had poured out of this vampire.

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck. Hitomi looked up at him. His face was before her eyes. The pair of blood red opals reflected in her eyes. Far away, in the depths of her senses, Hitomi felt a stab of pain. But she had already forgotten what had caused it.

For a long time, the body of the man and that of the woman fused together. And then the woman slumped slowly to the floor. The hand that had supported her now laid her out on the futon.

A bite mark now marred Hitomi's throat.

"I will spare you the same fate as me. Forgive the man who can offer you so little in payment for your kindness." He wiped his mouth and spoke in melancholy tones. The dust swirled around him. "Is this what we are doomed to become, Shuuran? To do as you beseeched me, to take the blood of our benefactors even at the cost of their blood?"

Outside the window the drum rang out. *Tan—*

Ryuuki was about to say something to Hitomi, but instead said, "Say a prayer, Shuuran. Are there no prayers in you? Neither are they in me. We do not even celebrate our rebirth into eternal life."

The face of this mighty man who had once driven the barbarians from the borderlands was colored by a sorrow that exceeded death. The sound of his voice was like coughing up blood. The blood he shed on behalf of others was never anything but.

So once again his corrupt body must put on incorruption.

The wind rattled the glass. Ryuuki's expression shifted. "Ah," he said in a faraway voice, "Princess calls." The gray dust swirled. "I must go. She would not do so unless something unusual had happened. Perhaps she has met with Setsura. Or she wishes to mete out punishment. In which case, the sentence was delivered long ago. What, do you not understand? It is what it is. You have served her for two thousand years and yet do not understand her heart. However —"

He bowed to Hitomi's body and left the room. Somewhere a bird called. There was no one in the surrounding fields. Only the bright moonlight on the dark ground.

Wrapped in demonic spirits, accompanied by Shuuran's dust, Ryuuki set out for parts unknown.

Chapter Three

“This makes no sense. Nothing is adding up.”

How many times had the walls of this dimly-lit room heard that refrain? But it was most appropriate to the situation. Here and there in the darkness were mutant human specimens—rows of narrow shelves crowded with dusty vials of medicinal compounds—a pair of metal rings rotating about each other with no evidence of any external energy source—what appeared to be a generator and electrical cables.

The room was a cluttered museum collection of ancient knowledge.

“Strange.”

Kikiou shook his white beard. This was his laboratory. A ferocious tint filled the otherwise fatherly face.

“You really don’t know?” he said, glaring at Yakou.

Dressed in a three-piece suit, Yakou’s refined and commanding presence yielded not at all to this alchemist and wizard who had controlled ancient dynasties from the shadows.

“Haven’t a clue,” he said with a curt shake of his head.

The back and forth between the two concerned the location of Setsura.

“Do not think you can hide anything from me,” Kikiou said pointedly.

“Why would I have anything to hide?” Yakou answered coldly.

Kikiou quickly abandoned that line of attack. “If you do not know,” he said, stroking his beard, “then who is covering for him?”

“Why do you think there is a traitor in our midst? Setsura could have escaped your detection and hidden himself away somewhere.”

“Exactly. He is made of flesh and blood.”

Yakou didn’t contradict him.

“He is a bad star. He absconded and secreted himself somewhere in this world. That possibility I have thoroughly thought through. But whatever he is planning, he cannot do it alone. He is lost in a dream.”

“That again. The dream of the clam. But that giant clam may have finally awoken.”

“No. I have seen with my own two eyes.” Kikiou pounded his right hand on the table. He had apparently resurrected the arm severed by Setsura’s devil wire earlier that day. “The dangers cannot be underestimated, which is why I never attempted to domesticate one. But three thousand years ago, I did make observations. No matter what the clam, once the dream has commenced, there is no waking for at least three days. I include myself and General Bey among the few who can break its spell. I would include your grandfather among them.”

“Implying that I rescued Setsura from the dream?”

“No. There is no telling how many aces that trickster carries up his sleeves, and pulling himself out of the dream is no mere feat. While in the dream, no one could lay a finger on him. So how to strike the balance?”

Of course Kikiou did not trust Yakou. He had immediately placed a barrier across the portal to this world. Short of breaking through it, Setsura must be hiding out here.

Except for the aforementioned reasons, his state of being was up in the air. While the dream-state Setsura’s devil wire rampage through the forest had ceased for the time being, it was just as likely that the clam’s dream had changed, not Setsura.

But there was no way the nature of his dream-state couldn’t have been ascertained three hours on. Hence the basis of the conjecture that Yakou was somehow involved. He didn’t act on these suspicions perhaps on the fear that Yakou was aware that he had disobeyed Princess’s orders and tried to kill Setsura.

And perhaps because Kikiou had developed a fondness for the young man. He

was a direct descendant of the Elder, and so couldn't claim a four-thousand-year lifespan. Nevertheless, as fellow lords and masters of the nighttime, whose lineage reached deep into the shadows of history, these were enemies Kikiou held in high regard.

Now Yakou was the rightful Elder. And employing the same secret martial arts, had defeated Kikiou outright in direct combat. Now he was Princess's servant. And though he occupied a position lower than himself, that was enough to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"*Sir* Kikiou," Yakou unexpectedly said.

The powerful warlock frowned to himself. Perhaps thanks to the education the young vampire clan leader had received in Great Britain, there was an edge to that "sir" that seemed more ironic than polite.

Yakou said, "I haven't been here long enough to authoritatively analyze such tricks or methods. If they concern you that much, perhaps you should strengthen your defenses then?"

"Already done. All exterior approaches are surrounded by barricades. A fly couldn't make it through without a by-your-leave."

"What about the interior of the manor house?"

"The same. All measures have been taken. If any unwanted visitor enters the premises, it will only be a matter of time before they are dragged before me."

Yakou intended sarcasm, but took a different tack. "But why run away in the first place? Perhaps he wanted to get the lay of the land before she returned?"

Yakou sauntered to a corner of the room, noting out of the corner of his eyes that Kikiou reacted as if he'd bitten down on a sour pickle.

What attracted his attention was a water fountain. A human figure stood in the center of the brimming marble basin, approximately six feet wide, with metal rings in her hands. With jerky movements, she passed the rings through the rising column, resulting in a small spray of water.

"What is it?" Yakou asked curiously. It didn't strike him as a simple lawn ornament.

“You want to know?” Kikiou said proudly.

“Sure.”

This warlock was not one to flee the limelight. He looked at the water fountain, definitely pleased with himself. “Hoh. The mouse has begun to move.”

Yakou surmised that his words could only refer to the ring in her left hand. She reached out at an angle of thirty degrees to the position of her head, her arm and the ring parallel with the surface of the water.

Just then, a stream of water split away from the fountain and leapt through the ring and splashed down into the basin.

“Neat,” said Yakou, an honest expression of surprise.

The falling water set off a series of ripples that merged and overlapped within the circumference defined by the ring. And therein, arose a different scene from that of the room reflected off the surface.

“The garden in the back courtyard.”

Kikiou didn’t have to say it for Yakou to know what it was—the sunlight shone down on the gorgeous array of dazzling flowers of all colors and kinds.

The image appeared to come from the sky looking down. On the bank of a small lake was the Takako doppelganger, picking what looked like purple water lilies. Yakou was a bit taken aback, but quickly divined what was going on.

“That’s one of your dolls. What in the world is she up to?”

“I’m onto you now—” Kikiou growled to himself. The fierce look in his eyes reflected off the image in the water. “After she lured out Setsura, Setsura in turn lured her away from my influence. Stands to reason. After all, he is a handsome man, and he did save her life.”

“And those flowers?”

A terrible smile creased the old man’s lips. “It’s called the moon lily. A poisonous plant that grew in one country back during the Tang Dynasty. There is no way a girl like her could know anything about that. Obviously someone is pulling her strings. The question is to what ends—” Kikiou’s voice trailed off. “That suggests a little poison is in the offing. The question is whether he intends

it for you or Princess?”

“Setsura isn’t so stupid as to believe he could kill any of us with poison.”

“It seems there are things about which the Elder’s grandson remains ignorant. You cannot die. However, the right poison can be quite effective. Depending on the circumstances, the risk of losing your eyesight becomes grave. A well-placed shot and your eyes would not regenerate. Setsura Aki knows his horticulture better than you.”

Yakou sank into silence. Kikiou laughed in a manner that suggested a bluff called, and the bluff behind that one anticipated. “Well, how shall we proceed then? Is Setsura pulling her strings, or are we overreacting? In either case, I am the one who made her, so I should follow her wherever she goes. And where she goes Setsura will be waiting to douse us with poison. In that case, Princess would surely condone us meting out punishment where it was due. Ah, she is on her way.”

Takako walked across the water fountain and disappeared into a corner of the “screen.”

The doll’s stone hand again formed a screen on the water’s surface. Takako was hurrying down a hall.

“Hoh. The maidservants’ wing. Of course, the bastard makes allies wherever he goes. Ah, this room, is it?”

Takako disappeared into one of the many doors set into the walls of the long corridor. Kikiou got to his feet.

“Wait—” said Yakou.

Kikiou turned his back and stifled an evil grin. Yakou wasn’t trying to stop him because he was concerned for Setsura’s welfare. He was frightened of Kikiou defying Princess and killing Setsura.

“What? I have a task for the young woman. That is all. Would you like to come along?”

“Understood,” said Yakou with a nod.

He actually hadn’t said one way or the other. Kikiou pretended to take the

statement at face value. Covering for Setsura was sure to backfire, and having concocted a cover for his subsequent actions, Kikiou was determined to bring down Setsura. Far from stopping him, Yakou must play a part in it as well.

Setsura thanked Takako for the two bouquets of purple flowers.

“That’s okay. Just knowing I’ve been helpful.”

“More than enough.”

“Thank you.”

Pretend Takako looked quietly at Setsura. A question seemed to linger in her eyes and Setsura addressed it without pretense. She got up from the chair.

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere. I don’t know. I think I will continue to live as long as I stay in the manor house.”

“Perhaps,” said the genie who had come to this world to destroy it.

“Goodbye,” said Pretend Takako. She stood in the doorway. “Goodbye, you beautiful man.”

Setsura raised his hand. And suddenly pulled it back. The invisible thread in his right hand turned Pretend Takako like a top, spinning her around in back of him.

“What?”

“I can sense Kikiou’s presence.”

“Nobody followed me. I made sure.”

“He must have access to a subterranean entranceway. Is the adjoining room the same as this one?”

“No. It’s a storage room.”

“Then you have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Eh?”

The door creaked. Before Setsura could push over the table, a wooden tube flew into the room from the crack in the jamb. Small holes peppered its surface.

The substances inside it combined with the oxygen in the room to produce a toxin that could knock out a whale.

It only took a second to reach full saturation. And five seconds to dissipate. Six seconds later, the door opened. Kikiou and Yakou entered the room. Scanning the room, their attention was drawn to the wall on the left.

"Of course," Yakou said.

The wall sported a perfectly round, smooth hole through which a human being could comfortably fit.

"The adjoining room, eh? Go around through the hall."

Kikiou got out another tube. The volume of gas from the first wouldn't have penetrated the other room with sufficient deadly force.

Yakou left. The door of the next room over opened and Kikiou appeared, still holding the tube.

"What's up?" Yakou asked, masking the relief in his voice.

The old man said in a disgusted voice, "They escaped through the ceiling."

Yakou looked up. "That's Setsura for you. He could get a dead horse to gallop for him."

"You happy?"

"What do you think?"

"And what about this?" Kikiou turned away from Yakou, revealing a neat hole in the back of his head. "I took precautions, but the bastard wove a cat's cradle with his devilish threads. *Now* are you happy?"

Yakou exercised his right to keep silent.

Kikiou's eyes lit up. He wasn't a vampire, but they were blood red. "You will never escape, Setsura Aki. I will not allow it."

The sound came not from his lips, but oozed eerily from the hole in his head. The accursed words that followed were weirdly appropriate to that second mouth. "This hole will fill in soon enough. There is something upstairs that not even that girl knows about."

To be continued.

Original Volume III Afterword

I wasn't sure at first whether I should admit this, but my publicist gave me the go-ahead. It looks like the four-volume *Yashakiden* is going to reach at least five volumes.

I started out as a writer wanting to be known more for novellas than epics (yes, I've long since thrown in the towel on *that* inclination). I felt back then that reading and writing long novels wasn't my strong suit. The *doujinshi* series I wrote during my college days, if compiled into a single-volume novel, would barely reach 200 pages—and that was over four years!

Consequently, even now, I have a hard time imagining the crowning achievement of my life's work as an epic series of a hundred volumes—no, never say die! Make that a hundred fifty! It's not so much the question of *what* I'd fill such great expanse of white with, but *how* I would write it all that I find hard to grasp.

Simply thinking in terms of constructing plots, creating characters, and bringing things to a climax—trying to imagine what must be going on inside the head of a writer commencing on such a project makes me want to throw down my pen in despair.

I find it equally difficult to imagine the sheer tenaciousness required to keep track of how the times and seasons change within the work, with what sort of alacrity the actors would step onto and exit the stage within the work, and how the governing idea would be maintained over a span of ten or twenty thousand pages.

This isn't the kind of thing any normal human being could pull off.

Generally speaking, I can invest my body and soul in turning one story into three books. To date, I haven't exceeded four. I have some ideas (the *Alien*

Demon World series has currently reached four volumes), but for now, I'm spinning my wheels.

When my magazine serialization editor told me, "There's no way this can end after four volumes," I blanched.

"Don't kid around like that. I'll definitely end it."

"But you've written three volumes so far and have only offed one villain. The good guys have lost one main character—the Elder—and Yakou and Nuvenberg are still in one piece. Meanwhile, you're adding more characters to the cast."

"Huh. When you put it that way, I guess so. I haven't made use of Princess for a while. Breathing some life back into her would take at least another volume."

"And that'd make four, right? What about the rest of the cast? Setsura, Mephisto, Nuvenberg, Yakou, the Mayor, General Bey, Ryuuki, Kikiou, the supposedly dead Shuuran, the doll girl, the big crow, Yoshiko Toya, Takako Kanan—you can't leave them all hanging. Hey, how about a fact-finding cruise to Hong Kong?"

"What do Demon City and Hong Kong have to do with each other?"

"Well, in fact, I—"

What followed was an interesting confession about his personal life. But since I've got to work with these people, I'll spare you the details. At any rate, what surprised me the most was the fact that I'd kept up a constant enough output (some months, I have to admit, more than others) to write a five-volume story with nary a pause.

I'm not saying it was easy. There were some nights when my editor, Mr. T, camped out in the other room demanding one page an hour (I was probably in a slump at the time). And there were some excruciating months where it was a struggle just getting to double-digits. (I must apologize to Seki-kun at SFA. "Hey, it's not just you," goes over like a lead balloon these days.)

And yet the number of characters continues—vexingly—to increase.

However a story may move of its own accord, it's not because the characters have escaped from the writer's grasp. The author is their god. Their fates rest in

my hands.

So I'm scratching my head bald and covering the table with dandruff. Startling my dozing editor with shouts of "Wake up, you big idiot!" Kicking over kitchen chairs and smashing oranges against the wall. Hey, these battles are all in the cause of breathing life into my Demon Princess.

To be honest, when I get to feeling like that, wrapping things up with a nice big bow really wouldn't be all that hard.

But with this effort, I don't want anybody to conform predictably to the stereotypes and end up with the regular mix of good and bad guys and sidekicks.

Each of the players on this stage has lived a life and shows up carrying a good deal of baggage. As the pages accumulate and the story expands, all will be accounted for. I can't pin down when I started thinking about it this way—perhaps before I began writing, or not long after, or one or two volumes in.

As a result, everybody in the cast of characters I provided earlier—Shuuran excepted—was still alive after three volumes. And even Shuuran—

When it comes to storytelling, I've come to believe that an artist claiming that such things are "out of his hands" is more likely making excuses for intellectual laziness.

So it is my intent that *Yashakiden* become at least a five-volume novel.

At the same time, haven't I been the kind of writer who gets tired of a series and will call it off at any minute? As long as I'm entertaining the possibility either way, a fifth volume will never happen. So it *will* happen. There's no stopping me now.

What exactly is going on here? A friend asks me, "If that's the case, then you'll keep on writing until you're completely satisfied?"

"We don't much care how much longer it goes on," answered Mr. T and his boss.

"Three is about as far as most readers will go," I reply.

But in defiance of all my expectations, *Yashakiden* is turning into a monster of an epic adventure. I can't say at this juncture if that's good or bad. The only

thing that is certain is that I shall press on.

I'll keep on writing, even not knowing if the light up ahead isn't the end of the tunnel but an oncoming train.

How is this all going to end? This isn't just about the book. My body and soul haven't been doing so well of late. I don't eat. I'm getting forgetful. To make things worse, my cholesterol is through the roof, despite my BMI staying the same. I'm looking into an abyss of sorts as well.

I'm told (politely, of course) that in another year I'll turn that unlucky age (42). That being the case, I've only one option left to me—and I don't mean something highfalutin' like: "Create a work of art with which you are completely satisfied."

I'll just keep on writing.

As unruffled and unperturbed as Setsura Aki and as coolly determined as Doctor Mephisto. And when Mr. T reads the last page of this year's serial, he'll say, "Yep, and onto number five."

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching a color version of The Picture of Dorian Gray)

December 24, 1989 (Christmas Eve)

Original Volume IV Afterword

The twilight wars continue—Setsura versus the Demon Princess and her gang. And my editors versus me. Every time I complete a volume, my book publisher and magazine editor say, “Hey, you haven’t finished it. After one more volume, right?”

I feint and bob and weave. “Sure. I’ll wrap it up in six volumes. You guys don’t want me just dragging this thing out, do you?”

When fighting a twilight war, it’s best to avoid a head-on confrontation. So they’re not going to declare, “You’re doing a seventh volume!”

And I’m not going to shout, “The hell I will!”

No, it’s better to begin by assessing the battlefield in civil and courteous tones. In any case, we’ve come to the end of volume four. The end is in sight. But as Confucius said, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Step by step.

And that journey gets even longer when the story starts taking side trips along the way. I’m well aware of that. And though I know I’m guilty here of getting the ends and means mixed up, I do love the diversions.

Granted, any journey goes smoother with all the bumps smoothed out and the pacing evened out. But as another philosopher said, you’ve got to pursue your bliss.

I’ve mentioned this before, but I’m in no hurry to wrap up *Yashakiden* with a pretty bow. Sure, trilogies are easy to digest. I could crank them out, one after the other. Except that’s not my style.

Yashakiden is well on its way to six volumes. That makes at least two more after this. I can’t say whether my readers will consider that “short” or “long,” but having come this far, I do know that the necessary ingredients in the rest of the

Setsura/Mephisto series are beginning to gel.

As is the deeper nature of Setsura and his alter ego. The killing art of his devil wire, and his special (physical) abilities sans it. The sights and sounds of Demon City. The lives and livings of its ordinary citizens.

For the time being, at least, Demon City Shinjuku and I aren't ready to part ways yet. My publisher asks, "How about a new *Makaikou*? Another *Manhunter* story? When you are going to write a sequel to *Night Tales*?"

They're trying to lure me down that rose-petal path.

But I'm a pro too, and see them coming a mile away. I've got my explanations and excuses lined up, and my defenses readied. It always comes down to a wrestling match in the end, so my workout regime is proceeding apace.

I've got it in mind to send for one of my old kenpo instructors. It's time for this writer of action novels to become a man of action in more than just words.

Well, it looks like I've wandered off on a tangent here. There are still hungry wolves lying in wait along the paths Setsura and Mephisto are treading and licking their chops. Here's to hoping you will savor to the fullest the best that is yet to come, in those two volumes to come.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Dementia)

May 31, 1990

A Vampire Tale Like No Other

Everything begins with “Demon City.” It now goes without saying that Hideyuki Kikuchi’s roots as an author trace back to his debut novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*. Also well known is the frightening thrill he got from simply seeing a poster for the movie *Dracula* in his formative years.

Thus it stands to reason that his second authorial effort, *Vampire Hunter D*, should revolve around vampires.

The long-awaited *Yashakiden* came seven years after his debut and took him back to where he started. Demon City became the foundation and the driving force behind this epic tribute to the vampire genre.

Published in thirty-seven magazine installments over four years and compiled into eight volumes, the sheer scale of the project is impressive enough. All the more so considering that everything Hideyuki Kikuchi has done since his debut —or ever since he was first entranced by the picture of fear and dread molded into human form and clothed in a black cape—permeates these pages.

As such, *Yashakiden* does not simply represent the culmination of Kikuchi’s work as an author, but the epitome of the fantasy horror genre in Japan and beyond its borders.

Yashakiden is the story of the all-out war between the citizens of Shinjuku and a vicious vampire gang.

Ever since Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, humans have been fighting these heliophobic vampires. Novels, movies or manga, this interspecies conflict has pretty much been the rule. Though the scale alone—setting an entire city against a gang of the undead—is not what sets *Yashakiden* apart in this instance.

Robert R. McCammon’s *They Thirst* takes place in a Los Angeles that has become an island and the domain of a vampire king. In two of the last Hammer

films, *Dracula A.D. 1972* and *The Satanic Rites of Dracula*, Dracula plots the conquest of the world.

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* and the manga *Teen Town ZF* by Kazuo Koike and Hitoshi Hirano create worlds where the vampires have already taken control. Ryo Hanmura's *Arteries of Stone* and Kiyoshi Kasai's *Vampire War* posit vampires guiding the currents of history from the shadows.

Rather, what sets *Yashakiden* apart is the nature of the conflict. In the aforementioned cases, no matter how far-flung the setting, the element common to the genre is that of humans fighting vampires. The human must resort to collective action and armaments against the stronger vampires.

In *Yashakiden*, to be sure, the people of Shinjuku raise arms against Princess's gang. But this is Demon City, where the "people" aren't all ordinary humans. The genie Setsura Aki and the Demon Physician Doctor Mephisto, to start with. Along with the witch Galeen Nuvenberg, the doll girl, an ectoplasmic raven, and a supernatural Special Forces unit.

Not to mention the clan of the unequaled Toyama vampires. And all manner of fantastic and grotesque creatures waiting in the wings.

Yashakiden is more than monster duels or mutants in a civil war against each other. Getting away from the human-versus-vampires formula also frees the conflict from the conventional two-dimensionality of good and evil, right and wrong, heaven and hell, light and dark.

Driving the point home, Kikuchi drives a stake through the Manichaean simplicity of Demon City versus the vampires by creating divisions within their own ranks and creating a love-hate relationship between Shinjuku and the "outside world." Allies turn on each other. Enemies make pacts. And break them.

The Machiavellian schemes multiply. Distinguishing friend from foe becomes well-nigh impossible. A tried-and-true ally like vampire clan leader Yakou becomes Princess's servant. Mephisto himself has turned bodily into a vampire, leaving Setsura to face the deadly struggle by himself.

With genie against monster and monster against other monsters, this is a heroic supernatural battle with scarcely a true human among its combatants! And so the

traditional conceit of vampire-versus-human has been completely cast aside, with the leading men and ladies all vampires or non-humans.

The allies are as strange as the enemies, and even words like “enemy” and “ally” are hard to pin down. These are the kinds of roles made for a world haunted by vampires.

Kikuchi seems to imbue all of his characters with multiple facets. As with Setsura’s dual personalities, “D” as well was born into the no man’s land between two worlds, endowed with qualities binding him to both, yet doomed to be accepted by neither.

Vampires can likewise be said to be citizens of those ambiguous borderlands. Less immortal than being cursed with immortality. Living with the memories of a mortal life that they can never return to, mortals being now only the source of their sustenance. Wandering forever through the twilight world.

Princess and her gang have lost their homeland and practically everything that makes them human, including death. These creatures of the night are sealed within an endless twilight, stealing through the world aboard their ship, seeking a place of sanctuary. If anyplace in the world would ever take them in, it must be Demon City Shinjuku.

Vampires did not appear in Shinjuku because the city was already corrupt and evil. Rather, built on the boundary between the real and the surreal, Shinjuku calls out to those expelled by the outside world. To these eternal “borderlanders,” there can be no place else for them but smack dab in this border city.

There alone they could put their wandering pasts behind them. There alone they could embrace the faint hope of calling the place their own. Except that only through slaughter and violence could they convince themselves such a destiny was assured.

Not even Shinjuku could reject them. The moment it tried, Shinjuku would cease to be Demon City. However it might try to kill them afterwards, it would first invite them into its house without reproach. That is what made the city what it was. Every freedom was condoned. The freedom to live. The freedom to die. The freedom to fight and destroy.

To live in Shinjuku was to fight every day to stay alive, to be bound by nothing but the individual conscience. Anything—animal, vegetable or mineral—willing to fight to the bitter end could fan the flames of its own life. Only when that thing ceased to struggle did it lose its rightful *raison d'etre*.

In this dog-eat-dog world, only the logic of exclusion is forbidden. No matter how strange, it is allowed to live and let live. Two thousand of its citizens once proclaimed that, "No matter what manner of life form, here it has the right to live to the best of its ability."

Even the mayor, described by some as an "absent-minded bank guard," wouldn't be cowed by a contingent of the Special Forces, fearlessly declaring:

> All who choose to live here are accorded all the rights due them as citizens of this ward. As long as they choose to live here, we will do what we can to protect them. No matter how noble your cause, no matter how much power you flaunt, as long as it's coming from the outside world it goes into the circular file. This is Demon City Shinjuku. What may make sense elsewhere won't pass muster here.

That which defies the existing order Shinjuku takes in, all the illogic that the inexorable march of modern society has striven to stamp out. And so the anarchy blossoms.

Except that the more order that modern society tries to impose upon reality, the more often disorder erupts cataclysmically in strange and distorted ways. By contrast, the steady diet of grotesque death that constitutes daily life in Demon City means that, as the mayor puts it, "Nobody comes to this city with hopes for a rosy future blossoming in his chest. And nobody leaves suffused with newly-found happiness."

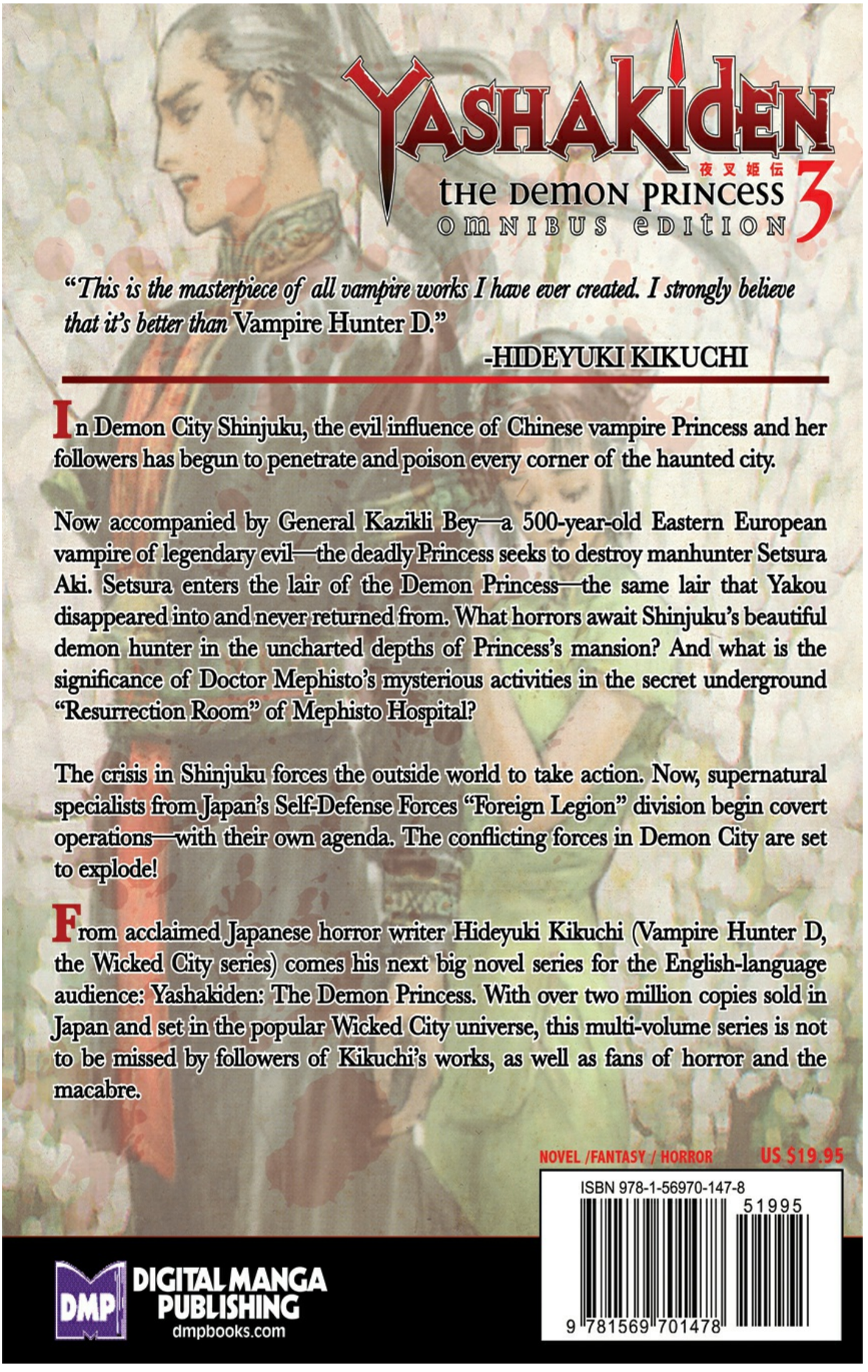
So from whence comes this boundless sense of freedom and vibrant sense of life? Confronting the conventions of both fiction and reality, Kikuchi poses the problem to us: the absolute safety whose absoluteness must at some point corrupt absolutely versus the omnipresent danger of a bewitching and liberating disorder.

What do we lose in our inevitable bargaining for safety and security? What do we lose in order to maintain the status quo? There is no firm answer to such

hypotheticals. But as long as Demon City exists, Hideyuki Kikuchi will continue to lob such rhetorical explosives in our direction.

In 1997, fifteen years after Hideyuki Kikuchi's debut, John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (in which Carpenter turned Manhattan into a Demon City-like penal colony) came to Japan. That year as well, the magical city of the century, Hong Kong (previously transformed by Kikuchi into *Wicked City*) was returned to China. And that year, Kikuchi began writing about the Devil Quake that gave birth to Demon City Shinjuku.

Yoshiharu Sasagawa (while watching The Great Yokai War)



YASHAKIDEN
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THE DEMON PRINCESS 3
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